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APPLEDORE FARM

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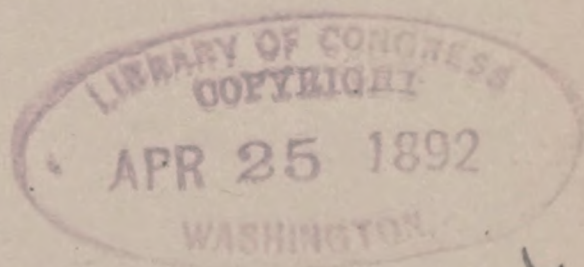
BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

"AN OLD COURTYARD," "MISS EYON OF EYON COURT,"

"ELIZABETH MORLEY," ETC.



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APPLEDORE FARM.

CHAPTER I.

SOME little way above Church-Marshfield the high-road to the market-town of Purley begins to climb a ridge, the lower one of two steep sides to a green and fertile valley. At the bottom of this valley, a little way before the high-road turns leftward from the ridge to seek a lower level, lies Appledore Farm.

The gables of the old half-timbered house can be seen across the sloping meadow below the road, but a thick yew hedge, set stiffly round the garden, screens the lower windows and the garden from any curious eyes. The vegetable garden can be seen sloping up the higher ridge behind the farm. Part of the home mead, too, stretches up the steep side of this farther ridge, and there are timber sheds near the top.

The farm-house looks snug and sheltered in this green hollow. A belt of tall elms on the left and the large and ancient orchard on the right protect it from violent winds and sweeping hail and rain storms.

A lane leads steeply down from the road to the entrance gate, above which the yew makes a formal,

carefully-clipped arch, through which is seen the honeysuckle porch and a square lattice window above it, both set under a gable that flattens this corner of the old building.

There had been all day in the air the breath of true midsummer, that soft, delicious warmth which in England, nowadays, we hardly look for till August. Mr. Reginald Bevington had been saying it was a pity to have so many good things at once, the fresh foliage of the trees and hedges, the wealth of wild flowers everywhere—for haymaking had not yet begun—and above all the luxuriant beauty of the flowering shrubs, the garden at Appledore being singularly rich in these. It was really too much, the young fellow said, to have all this natural beauty, together with an atmosphere enough of itself to make life delightful.

“It would be far jollier, you know, to have it spread over the year; whereas just as the leaves have lost their freshness and all the beauty of form, the weather will turn beastly cold. I know it will; it always does in July.”

Mr. Bevington looked at his companion as he spoke, but Philip Bryant, who sat pipe in mouth on the bench beneath the porch, was so enveloped in smoke that it seemed useless to expect him to talk.

The younger man continued his walk up and down the gravelled path that ran along the front of the house. It was a pleasant walk, and Reginald Bevington looked wistfully round him. He knew some time must pass before he saw it again. The many-gabled, half-timbered dwelling had once been a manor-house. The thick stems of the climbing

plants that in leafy June hid the red brick-work and the gray timber with foliage and flowers testified to the years they must have been growing, while their exquisite blending of color was a living memory of the taste that had placed such varied plants together.

A broad flower-bed stretched itself between the path and the blossom-and-leaf-girdled house. A *Banksia* rose clustered its pale yellow flowers against the tender green leaves of the Dutchman's pipe, while the exquisite scent of vine-blossom asserted itself even above the sweetness of the honeysuckle on the porch. Mr. Bevington was nearer to the vine than the honeysuckle, as he stood still enjoying the fragrance.

On his left another flower border reached to the tall yew hedge.

The borders were filled chiefly with white pinks and wall-flowers and many-colored columbines, while an army of laced and golden-eyed polyanthus told that these were the spring borders of the farm-house garden. The fair-faced young pupil sighed as he walked up and down. His hands were clasped behind him, for he had finished his cigarette, his head drooped forward on his somewhat sunken chest. He was very pleasant-looking—not, perhaps, regularly handsome, but with that singular fascination of expression which is so much more attractive than mere animal good looks. His sparkling gray-green eyes matched well with a rather wide, thin-lipped mouth; his fair skin was slightly freckled, except under the waves of his warm auburn hair, almost as soft and as fine as a woman's. He lifted his hat and pushed his hair aside, and the white skin it had sheltered looked as feminine as his hair did. His slender mustaches

and his clean-shaven face added to the singular refinement of his appearance. He spoke, too, as if he had spent all his life with well-bred people.

He turned the corner of the house and came in view of a gay show of flowering shrubs, many-tinted lilacs, tasselled laburnums—that seemed to stream with molten gold—red hawthorn, and snowy balls of Guelders rose. Here and there among the others came a double-blossomed peach. These gay shrubs bordered the bowling-green which took up most of the garden on this side. Mr. Bryant had more than once said he would root up the shrubs and plant espalier apples and pears in their room, and fill the bowling-green with potatoes; but then the flowering trees of Appledore had a reputation, and besides, Ruth loved both them and the bowling-green. Large groups of rhododendron in full beauty filled up the corners of the grass-plot. Mr. Bevington sighed again as he looked at them.

“They might as well have left me in peace till the end of summer,” he murmured. “It is so very pleasant here.”

It was certainly very pleasant at Appledore. Mr. Bevington had been studying farming there for six months. He smiled now as he remembered that he had expected to find summer-time dull in the country. He had few resources besides hunting and shooting; but three months ago Ruth Bryant had come home, and life had put on a very rose-colored aspect for the pupil. A few days after her arrival he had asked to be allowed to join the family breakfast, and to dine with Ruth and her father at two o'clock, instead of waiting for his solitary seven-o'clock meal.

After dinner he smoked with Mr. Bryant in the porch. When it rained the farmer enjoyed his pipe in the house-place, and Mr. Bevington retreated to a room called the study, on the right of the hall, set apart for the use of the pupils.

"Confound it!" the young fellow said, "I was getting on so well, too." He went on to the bowling-green and looked up at a window on the upper story. One of the lattices was open, but the space within was so completely shaded by a muslin curtain that he could not see into the room.

He stood wondering whether Ruth Bryant was behind her curtain.

"She usually comes into the garden at this time," he thought. "Perhaps she is afraid of the heat."

He stepped back to the path, and then on to the flower border, till he stood close under the window.

"Are you never coming?" he said in a low voice. "I have been ever so long in the garden."

A shapely, well-formed hand, though not an especially small one, drew back the curtain, and a merry voice said:

"Remember, I had to wait last Sunday. It is your turn now. It is not so very long, is it, since you came into the garden? But I'm coming."

"Look here!" he answered eagerly, "don't come now! I must go in and write a letter, and then I'm going to the village to post it; and I'll get tea at the hotel. Please do not wait for me! I shall come back and wait for you in the orchard at eight. You'll come out then, won't you? It will be ever so much pleasanter than it is now."

The answer did not come at once.

"Very well," she said presently, "I'll come."

"All right!" He went slowly back to the porch. Mr. Bryant had gone in-doors. The young fellow frowned. He could not find an excuse for delay in writing this very unpleasant letter. There was no help for it, and he went unwillingly to the study.

In about an hour he came out again, smoking a cigar, with the letter in his hand.

The slam of the front door echoed all over the old oak-panelled house. As the sound died away a door opened in the long bedroom gallery and a tall girl came out. She walked with a firm step, which seemed out of harmony with her pensive expression, and passed swiftly down the broad staircase, dark at the landing, where it turned, from the absence of a window.

A small, slit-like opening beside the entrance door showed that the walls of the hall were oak-panelled like those of the bedroom gallery. It also showed four doors, one on either side of the hall and one on each side of the staircase, which projected forward, thereby taking a considerable portion off the hall itself. Ruth Bryant cautiously opened a door on her right, and went quietly into a long, low room with windows at either end. The sunshine came streaming in through a half-opened lattice, but for all that a cheerful fire was burning on the hearth at the farther end of the large room; indeed, a fire was never unwelcome at Appledore. The walls were thick and well built, still, even when closed, the old lattices let in plenty of air; and the ancient doors, which hung crookedly on their hinges, were not screened by any curtains from draughts. The win-

dows were curtained, but the heavy green cloth folds were so old that they suggested damp rather than comfort.

Mr. Bryant was seated in a high-backed arm-chair near the hearth, and, as his daughter expected, was sound asleep. The girl took a chair and placed herself opposite to him, so that the light from the back window fell full on her face, while the glow from the burning logs made vivid contrasts of colors on her dark blue gown, and brought out the sunny lights in her rich brown hair. Ruth's hair waved over her clear white forehead in a broad, sculpturesque fashion of its own, and from the thickness of the loose coils at the back of her head it seemed to be very abundant. Her head was square and well shaped and her features were regular. She had a singularly beautiful mouth, full of character, and with curves that indicated a sense of humor. Her eyes looked sometimes hazel and sometimes gray, according to the light that fell on them; but it is impossible to paint in words the charm of her face—of its constantly varying expression—or the dignity of her graceful figure. She looked like a young Juno as she sat still, her dark eyes bent tenderly on the burning logs as if she saw among them the face she loved. She started. Her father groaned in his sleep; then he muttered:

“It means ruin—nothing else,” and then came another groan.

Ruth's face grew sad. She was only twenty, and at twenty girls sometimes have little thought to spare from themselves. Till lately she had only had her father to care for, and her warm, loving nature had

spent itself in devotion to this only parent. Her mother had died years ago, and till she was seventeen Ruth had passed most of her day-time with her grandfather and tutor, Stokesay. The girl had looked up to her grandfather as a great scholar, and also as a sound adviser in any practical or mental difficulty; but Mr. Stokesay had been a cold, repressive teacher rather than an affectionate grandfather, and the ardent-natured child would not have dared to fling her arms round his neck and kiss him, as she used to kiss and pet her father.

Now, as she sat looking at Philip Bryant, she sighed. His face was like hers. It usually bore the same bright and sanguine expression, but now his cheeks were drawn as if with pain, and his benevolent forehead was furrowed with lines which the painfully upraised eyebrows seemed to press more closely together.

Ruth fancied that some hidden sorrow was suddenly revealed to her in this unusual expression, and she instinctively looked away. That wrung, grief-stricken look reminded her how uneasy she had felt last year, when for nearly a week her father had been silent and depressed. She had questioned him then, and he had laughed and had told her she fancied things. He asked her to ride with him, by way of raising her spirits. He had been brighter afterward, but Ruth had not been satisfied; and one day when an old friend, Mr. Clifford, came over from Purley she questioned him on the subject. Mr. Clifford was a land surveyor, and Ruth had gathered that he came to see her father on business. She was always so merry and full of spirits that Mr. Clifford

was taken by surprise. Then he laughed at her serious question.

"Do not you bother your head about business," he said. "Your father is out of sorts just now perhaps, and the best thing you can do is to keep him amused. I dare say you'll not find that difficult."

Ruth was pleased, for she was a little proud of her power over her father. She knew that he was always ready to laugh at her sunshiny way of dealing with small vexations.

She had noticed that after this talk Mr. Clifford came much oftener to Appledore. She enjoyed the change which his visits brought into her uneventful life. He had lent her books since her grandfather's death, and he now brought them more frequently, as he discovered her fondness for books of more modern date and of lighter tone than those which her grandfather had left her when he died. She liked the old ones too; but she enjoyed talking over Mr. Clifford's books with him, and often had a warm discussion in defence of some favorite character in a story. But last December a sudden check had come to this new pleasure. Her father's sister, Mrs. Whishaw, Ruth's only aunt, was taken suddenly ill; and her young daughter Polly wrote an imploring letter asking Ruth to come and help her nurse her mother. Mr. Bryant was anxious that Ruth should go. He told her to stay as long as she was needed. She was greatly surprised, soon after her arrival at Mrs. Whishaw's, to learn that her father had taken a pupil. Mr. Bryant wrote that he was glad for her to be away, as the young fellow took up so much of his time. Ruth had felt curious, and she wished to be at home again.

It seemed to her that this Mr. Bevington must make life far more amusing at Appledore. Mr. Bryant told her the pupil gave a good deal of trouble in the house, as he dined late and took all his meals separately. Ruth had to stifle her curiosity. Her cousin's delicate health had suffered from the anxiety and the strain caused by her mother's illness and slow recovery; and Ruth could not help being aware that her own health and strength, and a certain natural aptitude for nursing which she had developed during her grandfather's last illness, made her help necessary to Mrs. Whishaw. Indeed, when at last the time for parting came, her cousin Polly told her tearfully that she did not know how she should get on without her.

As Ruth travelled homeward she told herself that if she had helped Polly she had also learned many new lessons in her aunt's home. She wondered why she had never been taught the careful, thrifty ways which seemed to come naturally to her cousin Polly; and yet she had noticed that, with all this care, there was not any pinching or meanness. She had even thought that the housekeeping was more refined and the fare more varied than it was at Appledore. She promised herself to teach the cook, and also the self-contented housemaid, Bridget, some of the ways she had noticed during this three-months' stay at her aunt's.

Ruth reached home and made acquaintance with the pupil; and very soon a new and overpowering feeling took the place of all her thoughts and resolutions. It drove away her sleep and robbed her of her usual hearty appetite. Her father teased her

about her fits of silence, and asked whether she had found a sweetheart at Mrs. Whishaw's. Ruth felt weak and languid, and yet at times she was so wildly happy that she was afraid of her own feelings.

Mr. Clifford had called to welcome her home again, but Ruth was impatient to join Mr. Bevington in the garden. She received her old friend coldly, and felt glad when he went away. He had come very seldom since that visit, but the girl knew that he now and then saw her father.

She had gone on for weeks in a state of dreamy excitement. The hours of the day seemed valueless that were not spent with Mr. Bevington. Sometimes she wondered what this change in her meant, but she so rarely thought about herself that she was happy to drift on in this exquisite hope and remembrance.

One day her mother's nurse, Mrs. Voce, who had also been her grandfather's housekeeper, came to Appledore to see Ruth. When the old woman rose to go away she looked hard at the girl and held her hand in hers.

"I beg pardon, Miss Bryant," she said, "but there's no one else but me to watch your goings on; and I say, take care of yourself."

Ruth flushed deeply, pulled her hand away, and left Sally Voce to go alone to the gate. She was desperately angry, not so much at the old woman's presumption as because the warning had suddenly opened her own eyes. She ran up to her room and hid her face in her hands. Her innate modesty was revolted by the discovery suddenly forced on her that she loved—loved, too, before a word of love had been

spoken to win hers in return. At first she felt that she could not see Mr. Bevington again, for surely he must have been as quick-sighted as Sally Voce had been; and then she began to wonder what the old woman had meant by her hint. If she had been sensible and patient she might have asked her. She questioned herself about Mr. Bevington's attentions. She was so ignorant of life that it was possible he had only talked to her as he would have talked to any other girl. There was no one living near Appledore with whom he could talk so freely or probably she would not have had so much of his company. The poor girl upbraided herself for her weakness, and then when she recalled the young fellow's looks and words it seemed to her that he must care specially for her. She determined to be more on her guard, to seem colder, and to avoid the chance of being alone with him. She had persevered in this for a week, till she feared he had observed the change. She looked across at her father; she was sure he had not noticed anything between her and his pupil; and then she wondered whether this unusually late meeting in the orchard had been planned by Mr. Bevington in order to call her to account.

CHAPTER II.

A SMALL wicket gate on the right of the porch led into a little alley or passage, and at the end of this another gate led into the pleasant green orchard. The orchard was very large, and stretched away to the high-road on the right of the farm-house, and was screened by a continuation of the high yew hedge till it approached the farm buildings; then the hedge became more rural in character, and just now looked like a tangle of wild roses.

The fruit trees were old and gray, and their lichen-covered boughs were old and twisted; but already the immature fruit—apples, pears, and plums—promised a plentiful harvest.

It was growing dusk when Ruth opened the inner gate and came into this green pleasaunce; for the apple-trees stretched out long, crooked branches that intercepted the declining light, and the girl started as a man in a smockfrock came out of the deep shadow with a sprig of green between his lips.

“Good-evening to you, miss.” He pulled his forelock as he spoke.

“Is it you, John?” Ruth said, laughing. “You gave me a fright. I took you for a tramp.”

John Bird, a slouching, heavy-footed ploughman, lifted his hat and began to scratch his red head. “Frightened at I! Lord! was you, miss?” He

chuckled. "A tramp wunnot find it a joke to climb that there hedge, an' a must climb, unless him comed across the farm-yard. Good-night t'ye, Miss Ruth!" He began to shuffle toward the gate by which the girl had come in, and then he stopped again. "Miss'll find it plaguey moist in the orchard. There hev been a doo as heavy as a two-hours' rain shower."

"All right, John!" Ruth gave him a pleasant smile. "Good-night! Tell Susan that if she can manage to come round on Saturday there will be something for her."

"Good-night! and thank ye, miss." John closed the gate behind him and went up the little alley.

"She be a trump—that she be," he said to himself. "More'n one as I've knowed would ha' said, 'What may you be doin' of in the orchard at this time o' day, John?' but not Miss Ruth—not she! Even if she had ha' guessed at it she'd never ha' grudged a poor man a few happles or a tatur. My belief, she'd ha' been pleased of his chance o' gettin' a few. Bless her! she's always cheerful, is Miss Ruth. The sight on she be enough to warm a chap—'a salve for sore eyes,' the missus says."

It is possible that at another time Ruth might have been puzzled by John Bird's presence in the orchard, but now she walked on the soft, deep grass under the trees without giving him a second thought. The yew hedge was too thick to see through, but on the right the orchard was parted from the angle of the high-road by an up-sloping meadow; and the hedge between this meadow and the orchard was a dwarf hawthorn, over which, as she stood on the bank, Ruth could easily see passers-by on the road before

they reached the protecting screen of yew which made the middle of the orchard such a secluded meeting-place. Ruth smiled, and stepped quickly down from the hedge-bank. Mr. Bevington was coming along the road, but he could not have seen her; he was looking at a field of oats on the other side of the way. The briars, covered now with pale, blushing, golden-hearted blossoms, hid an old disused gate nearer the farm end of the orchard. Ruth fancied the gate had been nailed up, and she wished she could open it. It seemed so hard on Mr. Bevington after his long tiring walk to have to go round to the entrance at the back of the farm-yard. She wondered why he had not come in by the lane that led down to the house from the road.

In a few minutes the briars began to shake violently, and then briars and the half-hidden gate were pushed inward with a sudden jerk that scattered the faintly-tinted blossoms and sent their petals flying over the grass.

Ruth stood under the trees, silent and a little startled by the young fellow's vehemence. He stopped to replace the gate, which he had almost forced from its rusted hinges, and then he came on to where she stood.

"You are a good girl," he said gayly. "Have you been waiting long?"

She glanced saucily at him.

"I should not have waited long, but I have only just come."

He looked at her gravely, and as she smiled at him he took her hand in his and held it firmly.

"I want to know what has come to you. Why

have you changed to me? I do not think I have offended you. You are not touchy or small-minded. You would not take offence at nothing, would you? What is it? Won't you tell me, Ruth?"

The tone of his words thrilled through her. She could not hide the sudden joy that filled her, and her eyes fell under the glow she saw in his. She tried to look up, but it seemed as if she could not.

"You will tell me, you sweetest girl!" His voice had a yet more tender tone; he was thinking how beautiful Ruth looked as she stood with flushed cheeks and downcast eyes listening to him. "Ah!" he went on softly, "if you knew what I have to tell you, you would have been kinder to me instead of colder these last days."

"I am not vexed with you," she said shyly; "you have not offended me."

He took both her hands in one of his and put his free arm round her waist.

Ruth shivered at his touch; it frightened her, and yet she loved him more than ever. She was so intensely grateful to him for this assurance of his love that she could not vex him by drawing herself away.

He drew her still closer, and passionately kissed her glowing cheek. At this Ruth broke away from him in alarm.

"You must not," she said, in a frightened, hurried voice. "No, please loose my hand and let me go. I see now it was wrong to meet you here, Mr. Bevington, but I—I thought I might trust you."

He let go her hand and looked imploringly at her.

"You are right, dearest girl, I ought not to have been so abrupt; it has all been too sudden for you.

You see, darling Ruth, I have been trying for days to find you alone to tell you how I love you, and you have not given me one chance. I only thought of my own feelings just now. Ah! if you knew how dearly I love you, you would take some pity on a fellow. Can't you give me a crumb of comfort? Won't you say you love me before we say good-by?"

"Good-by?" the girl stared at him with frightened eyes, and he saw her love shining in their liquid depths.

"You darling!" he whispered, as he bent over her, "you will own that you do not want to lose me? You care for me enough, don't you, to wish me to stay at the farm?"

"You are not going away?" she said in a sad, trembling voice. "Surely you are not in earnest in saying good-by?"

She looked at him, and her eyes, which just now had been so full of love, were swimming with tears which she could hardly keep from falling.

"You are sorry to lose me, then? You understand how my grief got the better of me just now. I may perhaps not see you again for months, darling Ruth. You will not be hard-hearted! Say you love me, my own girl!"

While he spoke his arm had again twined itself round her waist, but in a less masterful fashion; and as he pressed her to his heart and murmured his sorrow at this parting, Ruth's answering sorrow broke down her pride and her maidenly reserve. She burst into tears, and sobbed out her grief while she hid her hot face on his shoulder.

He soothed her and kissed her till her tears flowed

more gently. Presently she asked him why he was so suddenly leaving Appledore.

He put his hand softly under her chin and raised the lovely, shame-stricken face. "Why, indeed? How can I leave such a darling?" he said petulantly. "I want to take you with me, and never lose sight of you again. Why am I going, you ask? Because, dear girl, I have prejudiced and tyrannical parents. Some busy fool has been telling them about your beauty, and they have taken it into their heads that you will fascinate me. You see, my precious Ruth, they have spoken too late. I have loved you from the first minute I saw you."

She quivered with delight at this avowal.

"Have you? Have you really?" she said timidly. He looked fondly at her.

"I have a mind to punish you for the doubt in that question." Then, as she drew herself away from him, he said, "I will let you off if you confess how long you have—you have cared for me."

Ruth looked up with her saucy smile, but as she met his eyes her head drooped shyly, and her lover had to coax her to own in a tender whisper that she could not tell.

"I did not think or know about it," she said softly, "till I knew it was there." She felt that she had owned too much; she drew herself out of his arms and put her hand forward as if to keep him away. She looked at him anxiously as she said, "Why did your father and mother place you here? If they had inquired they would have learned that I lived with my father."

"Poor dears! they do not realize any condition of

life except their own," he said, smiling. "It could not occur to them—I am not sure that it would have occurred to me in their place—that—that your society would have been likely to prove dangerously attractive." Ruth turned away her head and colored with vexation. He saw the movement, but he went on as if he were unconscious, "You must be merciful, dear girl. Remember, they have never seen you. How could they dream that such a treasure of beauty was buried alive at Appledore?"

"Do not flatter, please. I cannot bear it."

He looked surprised at her abrupt tone.

"My darling! surely it is not flattery to say what I think!"

He tried to take her hand, but she waved him back. She looked, he thought, unusually serious.

"Why did you try to make me care for you? If you think their feelings are natural, surely you ought to have avoided me!"

Mr. Bevington was completely puzzled. It was difficult to believe that this beautiful girl who now held her head so proudly erect and looked at him so gravely was the merry, sunshiny creature he had been living and jesting with, or the tender, love-stricken Ruth who had so lately been sobbing on his breast.

"I am not a stone or an icicle, dearest," he said gently. "How could I help loving you and longing for your love? I would not give up the happiness of these three months for anything that could be offered me."

Something in his words jarred her, and yet she loved him far more tenderly than she did when she came into the orchard.

"Have you told my father you—you—care for me?" she said timidly.

He looked away from her. "Well, no. I could not do that till I had spoken to you. Now that I am to leave so soon, there seems no use in talking about it. He is already upset, I fancy, by my father's sudden change of plans; because you know it was arranged that if I liked Appledore I was to stay a couple of years. I have to leave to-morrow, dear girl; and it is kinder to say nothing about it to Mr. Bryant till I come again. Then, who knows what may happen? Eh, darling?"

He took her hand, but she turned so white that he put his arm round her. He thought she was faint.

"To-morrow! Oh, it surely cannot be to-morrow!"

The agony in her voice reassured him.

"There is, I fear, no help for it. My mother writes she is not well, and she is anxious to have me at home. The fact is, I believe my father expected me to leave to-day. His letter is peremptory—absurdly so."

He put his hand under her chin and raised her sweet, pale face.

"Come, sweetest, we have not many minutes left. Why should we waste them? Promise me that you will write to me, my own Ruth!" He kissed her very tenderly. "The joy of my life will be in looking forward to your letters." The girl's pride had broken down. In the near prospect of parting she once more clung to him. She felt that all her happiness was centred in his love, but still conscience would not be silenced.

"I have never kept a secret from father," she said,

“and—and he is out of spirits. I cannot bear to deceive him: mayn’t I——”

He interrupted. “If you were married, darling, you would have to keep your husband’s secrets from your father.”

She laughed at this. She looked her own bright self again, he thought.

“That would be quite different. I should not be left to live alone with my father. Now I could not help the consciousness that I was keeping something hidden from him.”

“I see you do not love me. You are selfish. Ah, Ruth! if you loved me even a little you would be glad to do something for my sake. The success of our love depends on its secrecy.”

She was silent; she looked still doubtful.

“Well?” he said.

“You will think me very ignorant and old-fashioned,” she answered quietly; “but I have never kept anything from my father. It will not be for long, will it, that I must keep this secret?” Then her eyes filled with tears. Moved out of all reserve, she said, “Is it not wiser to say good-by and end it? If your people have these prejudices they will never consent to receive me, and I could not marry you against their will.”

He bent down and kissed her, but he did not speak at once: he felt angry.

“Think how young we are,” he said, after a little. “Why need we frighten ourselves about things which may never happen? I shall have more power when I am older. Besides, I do not depend wholly on my parents. One of these days I must come in for my

godfather's property; and then, dearest, darling Ruth, I shall be my own master. Everything may have changed even by the end of this year. Tell me that you will keep our secret. To me it is an exquisite pleasure to share anything with you that is only known to us two."

He did not wait for her answer. He clasped her in his arms and whispered that this was their last good-bye: he had to leave the farm next morning early enough to catch the first train from Purley. "Your father has arranged everything most kindly, dearest; come."

He drew her arm through his, and they paced up and down till the increasing gloom warned Ruth how late it was. Bevington remonstrated when she said she must leave him, but he was obliged to let her go. He stood among the trees looking after her. He was charmed, but she had puzzled him in this last interview.

"She is a sweet darling," he thought, "but she is only half-won. Absence sometimes makes the heart grow fonder. Well, we shall see."

CHAPTER III.

RUTH found her father smoking by the light of a single candle. He did not often smoke in that room, but to-night he had wished to be alone, and there was always a chance that one of the servants might pass through the great stone-floored house-place, which, though it was called a kitchen, was seldom used for cooking. Mr. Bryant raised his head and looked at his daughter when she came in, but Ruth kept in shadow where she knew her face could not be clearly seen. She felt thankful that meals were over for the day. After high-tea at seven o'clock her father smoked a pipe or two, and sometimes drank a glass of ale. He usually chatted with his daughter before she went to bed, but to-night Ruth was impatient to be alone. Her head ached strangely; she hoped her father would not expect her to talk. He rose presently and said he was going to bed.

"I have to be up extra early," he added; "Bevington goes by the first train. Good-night, my lass!"

He bent over Ruth and kissed her. Their faces were so much alike in point of features and complexion, and yet the expression was so very different. The frank sweetness of the girl's mouth was the dominant expression in Philip Bryant's; but his lips lacked the chiselled firmness of Ruth's and his chin had not the decision which made hers so remarkable.

Her forehead was broad and square also. Her father's forehead expressed benevolence rather than much power of judgment. The eyes, alike in form and color, were unlike in their revelation of character; while Ruth carried her head erect and looked frank and fearless, her father's head was often bent forward, and his glance was shifting and unsteady. Ruth felt sure she should not sleep, and she wanted to be up early, in the hope of getting a last glimpse of her lover. She was, however, so healthy that her nerves were strong. The excitement of the evening had tired her without creating that sort of feverish disturbance which makes rest impossible. She fell asleep almost at once. She roused early and dressed, but when she reached the top of the staircase she heard her father's voice below, and she went back again to her room. She felt that it would vex Mr. Bevington if she exposed herself to remark. She had hoped to steal quietly down to the study and wait there till he came. She opened the window and leaned out; she heard the trap come up to the front door, and there was a murmur of voices. Ten minutes or so passed, and then the wheels crunched over the road. Ruth did not hear any leave-taking; she guessed that her father was driving into Purley with Mr. Bevington. The girl suddenly broke down, and she cried bitterly, then indignantly wiped her eyes and tried to laugh at herself; but her heart felt twice its size, and she was utterly dejected.

"It won't do to go on like this." She checked a heavy sob. "I'll go and get some breakfast. I'm no better than the dairy-maid was; and how I did scold her for crying after Peter!"

She found Bridget dusting the sitting-room.

"It bean't seven yet, Miss Bryant," the woman said, in an aggrieved voice.

"Never mind," Ruth answered cheerfully; "tell cook to set my breakfast in the house-place—some milk and some bread and butter."

Ruth knew that her lover would have breakfasted in the old-fashioned room, and she longed to be where he had been so lately. She was paler than usual, but she looked very lovely as she took her place at the end of the huge table. The sun streaming in through the lattice opposite seemed concentrated on her as the only bit of color in the room; in its full light her hair looked a warm auburn flecked with gold. The window was three-sided. The lower part of the bay was filled by a deep ledge, on which, later in the year, Ruth dried roses and carnations and jasmine flowers for sweet-pot; later yet it was strewn with lavender and basil and many another herb, set to dry and shrivel in the warmth; and this process, which had doubtless been continued by generations of Bryants, seemed to have created a permanent fragrance in the old house-place, a fragrance that triumphed over the tobacco scent of occasional pipes Mr. Bryant smoked there. In this early morning hour the faint fragrance was helped by sweet fresh air coming in through the open lattice laden with flower scents from outside. The yellow blossoms of a Persian briar showed themselves in full beauty against the window. Ruth wore the blue gown she had worn yesterday; it was associated now with Mr. Bevington. He had touched it, and the girl flushed as the memory of that close pressure

came back. Last night she had shrunk from the thought of her meeting with a kind of fear, but now it made her happy to close her eyes and call back the sweet memory of it all.

Only one fact troubled Ruth—the secret she had to keep from her father's knowledge. It must certainly be wrong to break a promise, she thought; and she knew that her lover counted on her silence. She was restless and discontented after breakfast, and for the first time it occurred to her that she had not enough to do. The time had gone by swiftly enough in these last weeks, while she sat at her window hidden by the curtains and watched for Mr. Bevington. Ruth asked herself what she had done with her time before he came to Appledore. The answer came at once: she had read, and the thought of books brought the memory of Mr. Clifford. She turned from the thought of him. She hoped he would not resume his visits at Appledore. It would not be possible to talk to him as she used to talk. She should always be wishing that he was Mr. Bevington. Ruth would not have dreamed of seeking her father's advice. She had been accustomed to see him consult her grandfather on all subjects, and until Mr. Stokesay died she had looked up to the unerring wisdom of the old scholar. It occurred to her that she had neglected for weeks her visits to the grave where her grandfather lay, beside her mother. She rose and opened a door beside the fire-place leading to the kitchen, and when she had given her orders to the cook she put on her hat and went along the road to the village church.

About a mile distant, half-way between the farm

and the church, she passed by a gabled cottage with its front so covered by a close-growing cotoneaster that its quaint half-timbering was hardly apparent. Ruth sighed as she looked up at the cobwebbed lattices, and then at a forlorn, weed-grown strip of garden behind the broken fence. The cottage had been empty ever since her grandfather died there three years ago. Mr. Stokesay had built himself a study, and had added to the house in so many ways that when he died the owner raised the rent, and hitherto had been unable to find a tenant.

Mr. Stokesay had been strict and silent, but Ruth had felt a reverent love for him. Little by little she had gleaned fragments of the story of the tall, thoughtful scholar. Now she involuntarily pictured him as she had last seen him, pacing up and down the garden behind the cottage, dressed in a long, loose garment—more like a dressing-gown than a coat—his broad, thoughtful forehead partly hidden by the large brim of his brown felt hat. Ruth smiled sadly as she fancied she could still see him grasp the sides of this brim with both hands and roll them up when he was puzzling out a difficulty. He had once been tutor of his college at Oxford. He was poor but well connected, and it was expected he would rise in the world; and then he all at once fell in love with a penniless girl, the pretty, ignorant daughter of a small farmer. Ruth knew that her grandmother had died when her mother, Kitty Stokesay, was a baby; and Sally Voce, her grandfather's housekeeper, had told her over and over again how the sorrowing man had shut himself up with his child and his books.

Philip Bryant had often said to his daughter that

her mother had been much too good for him, out Ruth did not know that the marriage of this idolized child, whom he had educated up to his own level, had embittered her grandfather's nature far more than the desertion of his family and his friends on account of the improvidence of his own marriage.

Philip Bryant had been sent to a good school, but he had not cared to study; and his father's improvidence and ruin shortened the son's chance of education. The elder Bryant had been a small landholder. He was a favorite with every one, and when his troubles came his creditors had purchased the property—that is to say, Appledore and its belongings—and had allowed him to free himself from debt and to farm part of his own land as their tenant.

When Philip Bryant married Kitty Stokesay she was only eighteen, and she was as clever as she was bright and beautiful. Mr. Stokesay could not help liking his handsome, happy-tempered young son-in-law, but his pride was mortified. He had fondly hoped his Kitty would have married into what he considered to be her rightful position. Philip Bryant came of a good old family, but he had had few advantages; and Mr. Stokesay feared that he might have inherited his father's extravagant habits. The old man refused to live at Appeldore, and settled himself in the cottage. A legacy from a relative had enabled him to make it into a pleasant and suitable home. From the time her mother died little Ruth went regularly to school with her grandfather. Even when his last illness came upon him he still took pleasure in teaching the intelligent girl, and although she had occasionally demurred when her

studies interfered with the long walks and rides she loved to take with her father, she had been too sweet-natured to persevere in refusal.

Ruth to-day walked along to the churchyard, thinking how different life had been while he lived. She had learned little since his death. She had read Mr. Clifford's books and she had nursed her aunt; and then, as the girl thought over the last three months, she knew she had only begun to enjoy life since she had known Mr. Bevington. She passed the post-office opposite the little inn, and then instead of following the straggling line of houses which called itself the village of Church-Marshfield, she turned into an up-hill road on the right, which led direct to the church. At this leafy time of year only a part of the old gray tower could be seen between the elm trees that rose above the low stone wall of the churchyard. A little farther a flight of steps with a turn-stile at the top led into the grassed space, with its irregular and lichen-spotted stones. Ruth went on till she reached the east end. There, just underneath the three-sided ancient window behind the altar, was a small neat grave, with a headstone on which were the names of her mother and her grandfather. Ruth had been twelve years old when her mother died, but she had never ceased to mourn her. To-day she longed sorely for her loving sympathy, and as she knelt beside the grave she unconsciously leaned against the headstone. Yes, she was sure that her mother would have told her whether she was doing right in keeping this secret from her father.

A gurgling sound made her start. What was it?

It seemed to come from the grave next ner mother's. Ruth held her breath in a sort of terror, and then as she rose to her feet she smiled.

Close behind the turn-stile, his rosy, chubby face pressed against it as if trying to squeeze between the bars, was a small boy of about four years old. A pinafore so entirely covered him from head to foot that he looked like a short brown holland bolster. He had been pulling so vigorously at the brim of his straw hat that he had wrenched the two outside rows apart from the rest, and had almost hidden his tearful blue eyes. Ruth, however, recognized him at a glance as Mrs. Voce's grandchild.

"Why, Georgie-porgie," she said, "is it you? What are you doing here—eh, darling?"

She reached the turn-stile as she ended, and bending down she put her arm round the little boy and kissed him.

At this, he first screwed one rosy fist into his eyes, and then the other. As Ruth passed by him down the steps, meaning to lift him after her, he caught at her gown in terror and hid his face in its folds.

"Dwoant 'ee go, dwoant 'ee! Georgie-porgie cannut bide alone. I wonnut," he said sturdily, assuming the first person, and looking steadily up at the tall lady.

Ruth kissed him again, and then lifted him down the steps.

"But how do you come to be here all by yourself, Georgie—eh, darling? Where's grannie?"

"'Cos I wants to climb the big hill, an' grannie says she's other fish to fry. I's going meself, I is,"

he said sturdily, with a rebellious look on his red, chubby face.

Ruth stifled a laugh. "Little boys can't climb hills, Georgie; it wouldn't be safe, dear, for you to climb up the hill."

"I isn't a little boy now. I's got nails in my boots," the child said; and he held up his stumpy little foot so that she might see a row of thickly-set nails all round the sole.

"That is grand," she said, smiling, "but, Georgie, had not you better go home? It will soon be dinner-time."

He pressed his rosy, pouting lips together and eyed her scornfully. He was not at all afraid of Miss Bryant; she talked to him as if she were his own age, and the small mite had a supreme consciousness of the inferiority of girls. He had been born and bred in one of the southern suburbs of London, and was quite free from any trace of the reverence sometimes still to be found in country village children.

"I's going up hill afore dinner," he said.

Ruth felt puzzled. The child's home was some way off, and she doubted her power of enforcing obedience.

"I've got to find the way first," the child said. "I lost it coming along. Do you know"—he gave her a sly, half-wondering look—"do you think you could find a way to grannie's house?"

"If I tried and you helped me, couldn't we find it between us?" she said.

He gave her a broad smile of approval.

"I'll help you," he said, "when we comes down the hill. You've got to go along with me first."

He looked at her defiantly, as if to see how far he might presume on her patience. Ruth laughed at him. "Look here, Georgie!" she said, "we'll make a bargain. I want you to take care of me as far as grannie's house now, and then some day I'll take care of you up the hill."

He snickered as if the proposal amused him. "You take care of me?" he said; "how can a gal take care of a man?"

He let her, however, take a firm hold of his wrist and lead him in the direction of Little Marshfield. "What a drasp you's got!" he said, looking up in Ruth's face. "I didn't know you was shut a drasper."

At a turn of the road she spied Mrs. Voce hurrying along evidently in search of the truant, and kissing his red, firm cheek Ruth set him free.

"Run along to grannie," she said, and she turned back toward Appledore.

CHAPTER IV.

MR. BRYANT'S habit was to go round his fields before breakfast and to return home at half-past eight, so that the postman had always delivered the Apple-dore letters before the farmer came in. Ruth started and blushed as she went forward to kiss her father; she was so conscious of the letter lying hid in her pocket, a letter from Mr. Bevington.

In the week that had gone by she had begun to get used to the burden of her secret, but it now weighed more heavily than it did at first. Mr. Bevington asked her in this letter to meet him in the Mill Valley, a secluded place not far from her home, but still not the sort of place she would have chosen for a meeting; for the part of the valley he specified—the Gutter, as it was called—between two lofty hills, was singularly lonely. If by chance any one saw her there alone with Mr. Bevington, she knew there would probably be gossip about her, and she felt she should deserve it.

Her father was so silent and preoccupied that he scarcely looked at her this morning, and her own silence at breakfast was unnoticed. When she was alone again she reread her letter. Her color deepened and her heart swelled as she went over the ardent words. She never thought of disobeying Mr. Bevington's summons. Indeed, after this second

reading she told herself she was a coward and untrusting. He who loved her so very dearly would not expose her to the slightest risk of gossip. He must know the valley better than she did, for he had spent hours there fishing; and he had probably made himself sure that the farther end between the hills was never visited by wayfarers. But she could not shake off a certain shrinking fear when at length the time he had fixed on, five o'clock, drew near.

The way to the Mill Valley opened on the right some way nearer home than her grandfather's cottage. A short road bordered by hedges led to a gate. When she had crossed the meadow beyond the gate the hills began to rise on either side, and a little babbling brook came merrily dashing along its shallow, stony bed, as if it were in haste to greet her.

At first the valley was wide and the brook ran broadly about half-way between the hills; these were covered with closely cropped turf and dotted with dwarf bushes of golden gorse, which this afternoon had the sun on them and seemed to glow with brightness, varied by the occasional cloud-shadows that fell on the crossing hill flanks and added interest to the lovely scene. Here and there, high up on the hillside, were busy nibbling sheep, pale yellow blots among the tufts of brake that shared the sides of the hills with the gorse. Every now and then, on the right, a rift showed between the hills leading upward by a narrow, ever-mounting path, and from each of these rifts, or "gutters," as the country folk called them, came brisk little streams, hurrying and foaming over the stones in their course to swell the brook that ran down the valley from the mill. The mill

stood on some level ground nestled among trees on the left side of the narrowing valley. The huge mill-wheel stood idle, as if it were taking rest; and a group of little children were playing in the mill-yard. A little way beyond a single-plank bridge crossed the little stream, and Ruth went over it. Usually she jumped the little stream, or, when recent rains had greatly increased its breadth, she would spring across from one stone to another; but to-day she felt timid and preoccupied. She was joyful at the thought of seeing her lover, but she shrank from the news which he might have to tell her. If, after he had described her to his parents and they had seen how much he loved her, they still persisted in their refusal to sanction the engagement, the girl thought that, terrible as it would be for both, Mr. Bevington ought to give her up. She should not think it right to persist in anything of which her father disapproved, and she ought not to encourage her lover in disobedience; and then she felt that it was too hard, too bitter; she could not give up her lover. She could set him free, but until he cared for some one else she must always love him.

"I could not leave off loving him even then," she said mournfully; "there is no one like him—no one."

The valley made a sudden turn, and as Ruth looked back the mill was hidden from her sight by the long flank of the hill which stretched across the path, showing over its shoulder the varied peaks of three other hills; while from the right, as she stood looking toward it, another lofty sunlit hill sloped down to the valley, its base crossed by the projecting flank

from the left. The wind had risen, and, as it swept over the brake on the hillside, the backs of the fronds showed a blue-gray against their bronzed surfaces. But to-day Ruth did not linger, though she dearly loved to sit and gaze at the scenery of the lovely valley. She knew she had still some way to go before she could reach the trysting-place named in the letter. She had to cross more than one plank bridge as the brook wandered at its own sweet will, now on this side the path, now on that, so close to the rocky upland that there was no passage between. On the right the rocks became even steeper, but on the left the up-and-down pathway was bordered by shelves of rock behind which the hills receded farther and farther away.

Ruth felt that she had grown old since she was last here. Then she had searched the rocky ledge for fairy nooks, and had found circles of fairy cups and fairy rings of seats. Ruth blushed with shame at her own childishness. It seemed to her that Mr. Bevington would think such fancies silly. She was now close to the end of the valley. Her path was mounting rapidly, and the brook lay some way below it. The water sparkled like diamonds in the sunshine, as it fell over a succession of stones which barred and at the same time hurried its course. A dark ridge, purple with ling, rose steeply in front, and seemed to end the valley and bar further passage. A few steps beyond a steep track appeared on the right, leading up to the source of the brook, which came plunging and foaming down the purple ravine. Here the brook parted into two streams: one rushed on down the valley; the other followed a path on the

left, which, instead of mounting, turned suddenly and wound round the base of the hill.

Ruth took this path, and was quickly out of sight of the valley. Before her, at some distance, was a stretch of open country; but she soon took a path that led her once more between the hills. A rushing sound guided her onward; it was the noise of the waterfall behind which she was to meet her lover.

She saw Mr. Bevington lying on the grass waiting for her. The noise drowned the sound of her footsteps. She went forward shyly, though her heart was full of joy. All at once he started up as if some instinct warned him of her presence.

"My darling!" he said, as he clasped her in his arms, "how sweet and good of you to come!"

She smiled up at him. She looked so beautiful, her eyes were so full of love, that his passion every moment grew stronger. In his stately conventional home he had been asking himself the meaning of the glamour which had surrounded Ruth and had made her seem so different from other women. He had told himself that the attraction he had felt had been only a fancy, a fancy created by her fresh innocence and loveliness, and heightened by daily association. He knew better now. He thought her more beautiful than ever as he pushed her blushing face gently away, and then kissed it again and again.

At first Ruth was passive; she was so happy in being thus assured of his love. But presently she drew herself away and looked at him. "Have you seen your father and mother?" she said timidly.

He took her hand in his as he answered.

"Yes, I have been at home with them, my darling."

He was fondling her hand between his; he seemed to have forgotten every one else.

"Did you—did they——" She hesitated, and he looked at her inquiringly.

"What does the darling want to know?" he said, in a petting, tender tone that thrilled through Ruth and made her feel weak with happiness.

"I mean, what did they say about us? Do they know you are here to-day?"

He looked at her sharply. It seemed impossible that such unsophisticated ignorance of life could be real; and then the clear truth he met in her eyes shamed him out of his momentary doubt.

"No, they do not know," he said. "The fact is, I found the house full of visitors—down for Whitsuntide, you know. I have not as yet had the chance of a quiet talk. I shall join them in town to-morrow, but I fancy I shall wait a bit before I speak about you. Do not let us waste our precious happiness by talking about them!"

He tried again to put his arm round her, but Ruth moved farther away.

"Is it right for us to meet till my father at least knows of our engagement? I should be easier, and happier, too, if your people knew. I cannot alter that. Please, you must let me tell my father!"

He drew her close to him. "My darling, that would ruin everything. Your father is proud, and he would consider it his duty to tell my father of our attachment. He does not know my people. I do not wish to speak against them; but they have

worldly notions, and any appeal to them would be useless. Let us be patient, darling. I shall soon be my own master, so far as money is concerned, and then we shall be free."

Ruth sighed. She loved him more dearly than ever, but she shrank from the burden of her secret.

"You could trust my father," she said. "If I told it him as our secret he would not speak of it to any one. You will trust him, will you not?"

She looked pleadingly at him, but he turned away. He began to walk restlessly up and down the grassy nook behind the waterfall. Then he came quickly up to Ruth at last, and taking her hands in his he looked sadly in her eyes.

"You must blame yourself if I give you pain," he said—his pathetic tone made the girl shiver with fear that she had offended him—"but it seems to me very hard that you should ask me to trust your father when you will not put any trust in me. No, hear me out," for the girl put her hand on his arm and looked at him with eyes full of love. "I know you think you love me, but not as I love you. I ask you to trust yourself to me in simple faith. You believe that I love you. That is a cold way of putting it. I love you so, my girl, that I would trust all I have to your keeping. That is how I love you; and in return, you will not consent to keep the knowledge of our love to yourself for perhaps a few months. Ah, Ruth! I fear you do not really care for me. It would not make you very sorry if you never saw me again."

The pain in her face touched him.

"If I had not cared very much, do you think I should be here now?" she said in a quiet voice.

He took her in his arms again and held her there.

"Forgive me!" he whispered. "I am ungrateful, but the truth is I am distracted to feel that we must part again. I hate going back to things and people which are not you, my sweet one. I long to take you with me."

She smiled at this.

"I must preach patience now," she said. "If you think it will only be for a few months I will try not to mind the secret, but we need not meet again in this way. There is every chance that even this meeting may come to my father's knowledge, and"—she paused, a sob rose in her throat at the thought of her trusting father—"it would almost break his heart to think I could deceive him."

There were tears in her tender, dark eyes, and her lover kissed them away.

"I have a cure for that," he said joyfully, as if a sudden thought had come to him; "we will get married—quite quietly, you know—and then if any gossip should reach your father about our meetings you must confess. I am sure he will admit that a wife is bound to keep her husband's secrets."

He looked so delighted with this solution of the difficulty, he kissed her so tenderly before he would let her answer him, that for a moment Ruth yielded herself to the happy dream. She was going to be his wife, and of course she must trust him; but the feeling passed swiftly away, and she again freed herself from his close embrace.

"No! no! That would be still worse," she said. "I could not marry against my father's will, and you would offend your parents past forgiveness. Do

not let us begin by being undutiful. We could not expect a blessing on such a marriage."

"You dear little Puritan! If you knew more of the world you would see that a love marriage nowadays is sure to displease worldly parents, unless indeed the girl has money; and that is just the thing I have no need to seek in a wife. If my godfather had only died when he was so ill in the spring I should have been now free to do as I like. Do not be prudish, darling! Try to think only of the happiness you can give me! I know, sweet one, you would rather please me than yourself. Leave it to me. I will arrange it all, and then I will write."

He had flushed with excitement, and he caught at her hand as if he meant to hold it till she consented.

But though she loved him dearly, Ruth felt that he did not understand her.

"I cannot do it," she said. "Forgive me! Please do not ask me! I know it would be wrong. I—I shall not change, but I am sure we had best not meet like this till you are, as you say, free."

"That is absurd—monstrous even. Do you suppose I can get on without seeing you, you beautiful, cold-hearted girl? You cannot, either. You do not know your own feelings. If you love me you will be unhappy without me. The best way would be to take you away and marry you. You would be glad to have been made happy in spite of yourself."

He looked as if he were in earnest, but Ruth smiled. She felt full trust in herself, and she trusted Mr. Bevington. She would have thought it a sin to doubt his respect for the woman he wished to make his wife, but such a thought did not trouble her.

Her trust in him was equal to her love, and her ignorance of evil kept her free from fear.

"We must say good-by," she said, in an unwilling voice; for she could not bear to give up the dear delight of his presence. "I shall be missed, and then there will be questions; and—and I can't tell a story, you know."

"Not even for me, hard-hearted child?" He put his hand under her chin, while he looked into her eyes. "Well, I give in to you now. You trusting darling! you do not ask even a promise from me, and yet you promise to be true. I seem to yield now, but not for long. You will hear from me soon, and I know I shall find you more reasonable. You will write to me, my precious love?"

"I will answer your letters," she said shyly. Ruth was love-blind. She looked on Mr. Bevington as her superior in every way. She felt very timid at the idea of writing to him, and then her natural hopefulness suggested that there would be something to answer in his letters.

He kissed her passionately. She drew her hand lingeringly from his warm clasp and turned back toward the Mill Valley. She suddenly turned again and came back. He thought she had repented, and he went joyfully forward.

"I do trust you fully," she said before he reached her. "I will be true to you, but remember you are as free as if you had never seen me. If love will not hold you true, a promise would not. It is different with me. I cannot help my love."

She retreated as she spoke, alarmed at her own confession; and she had fled away up the glen before he could reach her.

CHAPTER V.

RUTH was strong and healthy, both in mind and body; and her love was also strong. For days after that meeting in the glen she had felt that she must recall her lover. She could not bear the separation from him. Her heart ached with the pain of loss, and who could say, she asked herself, how long it might be before she saw his dear face again or felt his kisses on her lips?

She could not sleep, she could not eat; and she was so dreamy and unrecollected that her father often had to speak twice before she took in his meaning. If she had been less self-absorbed she might have wondered that her father did not remark on her abstraction; but besides the constant thought of her lover she had to keep up a fierce struggle with her inclinations. Mr. Bevington had kept his word, and had written to urge a private marriage. He had planned that Ruth should say she was going to see her aunt, and that she should meet him half-way, at a place he named. He had arranged everything, and then he proposed that when the term of her visit was ended she should return to Appledore. He reminded Ruth that she had told him her father rarely wrote to her, and that there would be little risk of discovery.

Ruth did not hesitate in her refusal. She said it was impossible that she could so deceive her father,

but when her lover wrote again imploring her to meet him at the waterfall she found it much harder to resist; but she at last found strength to say that she would not meet him till she could do so openly. He had, however, persevered. He had written reproachful letters, telling her she did not love him, that she was selfish and cold; but Ruth remained firm both in her love and in her refusal to meet him. If she felt it so hard to refuse him when he wrote, what would it be face to face? She dared not risk such a trial. His love was so masterful, it had so strange a power over her, that she shrank from it while she longed for its presence.

On Christmas Day she and her father dined together alone, and suddenly Ruth awakened from her long preoccupation. She was looking across the table at her father, and she felt shocked at the change she saw in him. He had grown thin and haggard, and he seemed restless.

She asked herself whether he had felt a change in her, and was unhappy at her want of confidence; and then she smiled at her own vanity. It was not likely that he had noticed any change. She could not expect to be as much to her father as he was to her. Was he so much to her? Ruth reddened with self-reproach. She had, perhaps, done her duty as usual, but she had not been living only for her father as she had said she would when her grandfather died. She had put Mr. Bevington first. She sat looking at the worn face till all the warmth of her nature rose in protest against her selfishness. It had blinded her to his increased anxiety, for there had not been that drawn look in his cheeks in the summer.

"Are you well, father dear?" she said anxiously.

He smiled at her wistful tone, and exerted himself to remove the impression she had taken; but Ruth's eyes had been opened, and she wrote that night to Mr. Bevington. She wrote that although she loved him as dearly as ever, she felt that she must leave off writing to him till she could tell her father of her engagement. This secret correspondence was deceitful, and might easily come to her father's knowledge.

Mr. Bevington had written twice afterward, but Ruth had not answered him.

It was April now, and the weather was chilly. Nine months ago Ruth had parted from her lover at the waterfall in the glen, but the time has passed so slowly at the farm that it seems a far longer period. Ruth was saying this to herself as she sat beside the fire watching her sleeping father. He had smoked his pipe in the porch, and had come into the sitting-room half an hour ago. He had settled himself in his chair, and had closed his eyes without a word or a look for his daughter.

All at once he started in his sleep; he muttered something, and Ruth thought he said Clifford. She had wondered more than once why Mr. Clifford came now so often to Appledore. His visits seemed to cheer her father; he looked less worried when his friend went away. Ruth told herself this was another instance of her self-conceit. She used to fancy that Mr. Clifford came to see her, and she had enjoyed his visits before she knew Mr. Bevington. Now he scarcely spoke to her, and he did not offer to lend her any books. He was a land surveyor, and possibly he gave her father advice; but she could hardly

fancy that he was needed so often at Appledore. A moan broke from the sleeper's lips, and then a cry:

"Help, help, Ruth!"

The girl was greatly startled. She went forward and put her hand on his shoulder.

He opened his eyes and looked at her in a dazed, half-conscious way.

"You had better wake up, dear," she said, cheerfully. "You have slept longer than usual."

He did not give his usual cheerful smile as he answered her.

"I wonder at that. I was having such unpleasant dreams that I should have been better awake."

Then he sat silent, staring into the burning logs as if he saw something special in them.

Ruth was summoning her courage. Whether it made her father angry or not, she was determined to share his trouble. She might be able to help him, or, if that was beyond her power, she could at least give him her sympathy; and it must ease his heart, she argued, to share his burden with her. She believed that it was a money difficulty, and in that she could help him when her next birthday came round. Sally Voce had said that her grandfather had left his money to Ruth when she came of age. Ruth knew that her grandfather had died suddenly, before his will was signed; but Sally Voce had told her that would make no difference. Ruth had long ago determined that when this money came to her she should buy her father a horse and a reaping-machine. His old horse was past work, and it made the girl nervous when her father rode Jack home from Purley on a dark night. But if this trouble was debt,

and she sorely feared it was, then the money must go to pay her father's creditors.

She was so shy at beginning that her voice startled her; for it sounded hard and forced.

"I want you to tell me what is troubling you, father. It makes me unhappy. I know that you are very much worried."

The firm tone made him feel weaker, and yet he was angry at having to yield. He threw up his arms in despair.

"Can't you leave me alone?" he said. "I told you you were fanciful when you asked me before."

Ruth went and knelt down beside him, and took possession of both his hands.

"Father dear"—her unusual shyness had gone; she spoke cheerfully, yet very tenderly—"I know there is trouble, dear. Just now in your sleep you asked me to help you; suppose you let me be of use to you now you are awake, won't you?"

He freed one of his hands and put it up to hide his eyes from her loving scrutiny; presently Ruth saw tears fall through his fingers. She kept silence; it was so terrible to her to see her father cry.

"You had better leave me alone, my girl," he said when he could steady his voice. "There's no use in meeting trouble half-way; you'll know about it soon enough."

She waited, but as he was silent she said, "Ah! but I want to know now. Are we in debt, father?"

He sat upright and looked at her in surprise.

"Who can have told you that? Did Sally? I did not think she would have chattered."

"No one told me, dear. You see, I'm a witch"—

she laughed brightly—"I guessed it. I know you have had losses both with sheep and cows."

He smiled at this, and stroked her hair.

"No, no, my lass, I don't deceive myself like that. Such losses as mine have been don't pull a man down all at once if he's been thrifty. It's not my fault, Ruth, that I wasn't taught to be careful. As long as I had your mother I kept straight. I lost my balance when she left me, and I've never got right again. She was too good for me, that's the truth; and God saw it, and he took her to a better place."

Ruth rose. She put her arm round her father's neck and kissed him.

"Do you owe very much?" she whispered.

"More than I can pay for years to come," he said sullenly.

It did not seem a wise moment in which to make her offer, and she sat thinking what could be done to save expense.

"I think we can do without Faith," she said, "or suppose we send Bridget away. I can manage with Faith. She is a willing little creature."

"No, I can't have you spoiling your hands," he said, "and tiring yourself with housework. How can cook do without Faith? She helps in the kitchen work."

He spoke irritably, as if he thought the proposal unnecessary; but Ruth was determined.

"I think better of cook than that," she said, smiling; "and if she does not like the plan, will it not be as well to send her away with Bridget and get a cheaper sort of servant?"

"Save five pounds a year and be miserable," he

said. "That sort of saving does more harm than good. There, child, say no more about it; I'm not going to let you suffer. I've injured you enough already."

"How can you have injured me?" she said, laughing; "you are the best father a girl ever had."

He pushed her away as she tried to put her arm round him, and he rose from his chair.

"After all, I had better tell you," he said in a hoarse, strange voice that filled her with fear. "You'll not call me the best father in the world, I take it, when you know that I am a thief. Yes, a thief!" for she had forced herself to smile at what she considered exaggeration. "I have robbed you of your grandfather's savings, Ruth; every penny of it is made away with."

He turned from her and leaned against the wall; he shrank from meeting her eyes.

"Is that all?" she said brightly. "I was just going to ask you to use it as soon as it was mine to give you, so you see it makes no real difference."

"Child, you do not understand. Your grandfather was a learned man, but he thought he knew more than he did. He had left this money to your mother to do what she pleased with, and he did not alter his will till just before he died; then he put off signing it till he could get the doctor and the parson to witness it. He never signed it, and the money came to me."

He paused, and Ruth stood silent. She hardly knew what to say.

"I never meant to touch it, but I had a run of bad luck in a way you little think of. I had to draw

some money out to meet my losses, and then I thought that if I won I might replace all and yet not be a loser; but no, fate has always gone against me since I lost your mother. You have not a penny, my girl. Your father has spent every farthing that was yours."

"But, father——"

He put out his hand to keep her away; and then he crossed the room and closed the door behind him.

CHAPTER VI.

THE morning was full of mist. The sky was hidden by gray cloud masses, and these hung so low that rain seemed to be inevitable. Ruth was accustomed to disregard weather. She had gone daily to her grandfather's cottage, through many a storm of hail and rain and snow; and she started this morning without hesitation, though she took an umbrella by way of protection. Her father's confession had troubled her, not on account of the loss of her little fortune, but because she was so perfectly exact in her own dealings that she could not realize that her father, her own dearly loved father, should have done this wrong.

"He meant to replace it," she argued. But she could not at once reconcile herself to the fact and that night she had slept very little. Her father had finished breakfast before she appeared. He gave her a hasty kiss and went out. Ruth felt restless; she could not settle to anything. It seemed to her that the mere sending away of one servant would not be a very large economy, and yet she shrank from turning herself into a servant—more, perhaps, than she would have done before she loved Mr. Bevington. He had kissed her hands, and had told her they were "white and lovely." She did not want to spoil them, but she must do something to help her father.

She thought she might try to teach. She had been so well taught that she could, perhaps, teach others. This last idea came while she sat at breakfast, and it helped her to be definite. She rose from table bent on a visit to Sally Voce.

In youth Mrs. Voce had been nurse in a good family, and she was supposed to be learned about the manners and customs of her superiors. She had given Ruth many a lecture on the subject of climbing gates and fences in earlier days, but the child had loved her in spite of what Philip Bryant called "Sally's frumpishness." Ruth often paid the old woman a visit, though she lived at some distance from Appledore. Their relations had not, however, been so cordial since Mrs. Voce took upon herself that lecture respecting Mr. Bevington. Ruth remembered it as she walked along the high-road that led to Little Marshfield. On either side the hedges were powdered with green, and among the trees behind the hedge on the right the larches were covered with exquisite pink-tipped tassels of greenery. The birds chirped in an uneasy excitement; they evidently expected storm. The hedge bank was gemmed with blue and white and yellow, with here and there a tuft of rosy ragged robbin peeping out among the quieter flowers. At one point the road was quite fragrant, and Ruth stooped down to gather a bunch of violets for her old nurse.

At last the dull, straight high-road ended. A few straggling cottages appeared on both sides of the way, and then came a couple of alehouses nearly facing one another, the "Pig and Whistle" on one creaking sign-board and "Saint George and the

Dragon" on the other—advance guards to the entrance of the village.

Ruth turned into a gap between the cottages on the right, and soon reached a narrow path beside a dashing little stream. The brook came hurrying from a mill farther on, and divided about a score of picturesque cottages, each isolated in its own garden and shaded in summer-time by fruit trees, which already gave a fair promise of blossom. Some of these cottages faced the little stream, others were set at right angles to it; and for the benefit of the inhabitants on the left of the brook, who could not otherwise have reached the village, a small foot-bridge was placed across the shining pebble-bottomed water.

Ruth crossed this bridge just after she had passed the little chapel. Mr. Bryant sometimes said that this chapel was Mrs. Voce's chief attraction in the village, and that the minister of the said chapel had a comfortable time in winter by Sally's fireside. An opening in the hedge, already leafy in this sheltered spot, showed Sally herself sitting out in front of her cottage, knitting as diligently as a German *hausfrau*. She looked rosy and healthy. Her clean muslin cap was tied under her double chin by green cap strings; her lilac cotton gown and apron were of one pattern, though plainly the apron was the younger—it was so much fuller of color than the gown was. As she sat leaning back in her high-backed rush-bottomed chair, her neatly-shod feet showed blue woollen stockings of her own knitting—good-sized, sensible-looking feet and ankles, suited to her tall, stout figure.

Sally rose up at the sound of footsteps, and peered curiously forward.

"Eh, Miss Ruth?" She smiled at the sight of her visitor; she was very buxom-looking. "I didn't think to see you this misty-moisty morning, as you used to call it when you was little. How are you, miss, and how's Mr. Bryant?"

"How are you?" Ruth said. "You look as well as possible, in spite of the mist. I did not fancy you would sit outside such a morning, though."

"I must have the air, miss. If your poor grandfather would have took advice from me and had taken the air, instead of sitting in that stuffy library he thought so much of from morning till night, it's my belief he'd still be here."

She had pushed her chair toward Miss Bryant, and then, seeing that Ruth did not accept it, she went on, "Will you walk inside, miss?"

It was an ordinary one-storied cottage, with a neat parlor in front and a kitchen behind; but Mrs. Voce had persuaded her landlord to add a shed at the back of the kitchen, which greatly increased her comfort. The walls of her parlor were papered, and an old bureau in one corner on which stood bits of old china, a few chairs quaint enough to be coveted by a collector, gave a certain distinction to the room.

Mrs. Voce drew forward an easy-chair which had once belonged to Mr. Stokesay, and which the farmer had given her; but when Ruth had seated herself she did not find it so easy to speak as she had thought it would be.

It was so difficult to announce her intention without seeming to blame her father.

Mrs. Voce waited a few minutes, then she said:

"Have you seen Mr. Clifford lately, Miss Ruth?"

Ruth raised her eyebrows in wonder, Mr. Clifford was so very far from her thoughts.

"No, I have not seen him. I believe he has been at the farm."

"He's a good man, miss, and he would be a good friend to you if you would let him."

"Never mind Mr. Clifford, Sally; I want to ask you something. I want you to tell me if you know how people get engagements. I mean as governesses or companions."

Mrs. Voce looked sharply at Ruth and slowly folded her fat hands in her lap.

"There's different ways, and some takes one and some takes another." She blinked her small blue eyes at her companion, while her pink, plump cheeks quivered with curiosity.

At first sight Mrs. Voce looked unintelligent—a smooth-faced, easy-going woman—but a closer reading showed a parsimonious and persevering mouth and a determined chin, that matched better with Sally's sharp tongue than her placid, comfortable general aspect did. She was, like many other women, full of contradictions. She grudged the payment of an extra sixpence to any one she employed, and to a begging tramp of whom she knew nothing she would be generous in the way of food and clothing. Her husband had died years ago, so had her only child. He had left a young wife, with an infant and very little to live on; and when any one taxed Mrs. Voce with stinginess she excused it by saying that she was "saving for little George."

"I want to know the best way," Ruth answered.

"You'll excuse me, Miss Ruth, but what can any one like you want to know for, if I may ask?"

Ruth had hoped to escape this question. Now it was put, she looked hard at the old woman.

"We are not so well off as we used to be, Sally; and if I were to leave home and earn my own living I fancy one maid would be enough at Appledore."

Mrs. Voce sat with blinking eyes and parted lips a minute or two without answering; then she said slowly:

"I'm sorry to hear such news, Miss Ruth; but I'm not a mossel surprised. Who could be surprised as knew the goings on there's been since poor Miss Kitty and your grandpa was took to a better place?"

Ruth held up her head, and her eyes brightened with anger.

"What do you mean, Sally? What has been going on?"

She thought the old woman had found out her engagement to Mr. Bevington, and she was determined to silence her.

Sally gave her a glance of compassion. "You poor lamb! there is no one left to tell you but me, and I must take the chance of making you angry. You think maybe that it's failure of crops, and losses of stock, and what-not that have brought this trouble; it ain't neither crops nor stock, Miss Ruth; 'tis something worse; 'tis betting and neglect of business—that's what 'tis. But Lor'! how should you know? But there's those as knows your father well, and 'as seen him at all the races round. You've only got to

ask," she said in answer to the girl's look of scornful unbelief.

"Hold your tongue!" Ruth said sternly. "You have no right to talk in this way, or even to listen to tales against my father;" she paused and tried to quiet herself, she felt so vehemently angry. Presently she said, as if the talk had not taken this new departure, "I shall be glad if you can tell me the best way to go to work to hear of any employment. I am shy of answering an advertisement, for I have so little opportunity of making inquiries about people."

Mrs. Voce had reddened at the girl's rebuke, and she still felt sore and sulky. She did not, however, wish to confess her ignorance; for she was aware that a good deal of her influence over others depended on her assumption of universal knowledge.

"'Tain't, to my thinking, a good plan at all for you to go far away from home and leave your poor father to go to worse rack and ruin. No, miss, you might go away if you chose, and yet be quite near to him if you pleased—nearer to every one who cares for you. Yes, miss, there's one as loves the very ground you walks on, one as would be glad to care for you altogether if so be as you'd let him."

A sudden rush of consciousness dyed the girl's face and throat and ears even a deeper hue than Sally's. It was plain to her that the old woman was alluding to Mr. Bevington.

"I do not understand," she said gently.

The change in her tone puzzled Mrs. Voce. She had not yet forgiven Ruth for what she considered her daring, but this seeming meekness mollified her.

"Ah! you know who I mean," she said, blinking

at the girl, who had turned a little away to avoid her companion's scrutiny; "you've guessed right. Who could I mean but Mr. Clifford?"

Ruth rose hastily from her chair.

"You are dreaming," she said; and she laughed. "Mr. Clifford and I are good friends, but we never wish to be anything more to one another."

"Speak for yourself, miss," the old voice said, with extra sharpness; "I know better nor that. Why, Mr. Clifford's cared for you ever since you was a child of twelve or so, and he would have said so, I fancy, if that London lad hadn't come in the way." She gave a keen look at Ruth, but the girl appeared to be unmoved. "Bless you, child! I knows the signs. Sometimes when I've been looking out of the window at your grandpa's I've seen you go out of the gate and meet Mr. Clifford. Maybe you'd give him a little nod and you'd pass on, but not he. He'd turn his horse and he'd stay there, fixed like a post, a-staring after you till the last bit of your skirts was hid by the turn of the road. Look here, Miss Ruth, Mr. Clifford can help your papa much better than you can help him, and he knows the way, I bet! Do listen, miss"—the girl had turned away and was moving to the door—"Mr. Clifford has a beautiful house in Purley, and I'm told by them as has seen her—for the poor lady's a cripple—that his sister dresses in silks and the best of everything. Then he's so good. It was all along of he that my landlord built the woodshed back o' this. He's a regular good sort—that he is! And he's got a-plenty to be good with."

Sally paused, completely out of breath; for she

could gabble when need hurried her words, and she had sadly feared that Ruth would leave the cottage without listening to her eulogy. But Ruth waited, because she had something more to say.

"I hope, Sally, that you have not told any one else what you said just now about my father. If you did such a thing I would never speak to you again. Now good-by, and forget that you ever repeated such a falsehood."

She went out of the cottage and hurried on, not by the way she had come, for she knew several of the cottagers, and she was not in a mood to chat with them to-day. She went farther up the brook-bordered lane, and then took a turning that opened on the right, with an ancient wall on one side and a barn on the other. The side of this barn exhibited an elaborate amount of patchwork, the one part consisting of horizontal planks interrupted by a series of half-timbered brick-work, while on to this were patched short planks, going all ways. There was a good deal of varied color in the way of greens and lovely grays on this wood-work, but none to bear comparison with the rich, warm glow on the moss-grown thatch above.

Two small figures, with quickly-dropped courtesies, barred Ruth's way as she passed the barn. They wore straw hats and black stockings; one had a pink frock with a gray sash, and the other a brown frock and a yellow sash; both had their mottled arms full of bread.

Ruth nodded, and then she wondered whether the father of these children had money to pay for the bread they were carrying home, or whether, like

herself, they would go on eating and drinking in ignorance till the day of reckoning came, and they found that every crust they ate was at the expense of strangers.

She had by this time come out again into the high-road beyond the village, and she hurried homeward, full of anxious thought. It certainly seemed cowardly to leave her father when he was in trouble, but if she stayed what could she do to help him? If she went away she could earn her own living, and perhaps more than she needed for herself; and she thought it would be very sweet to be able to help her father ever so little. A sudden thought of her lover disturbed her. He would not like her to work for money, she was sure he would not; and then though Ruth was not a day-dreamer, she had a sudden vision of walking out in London, if she went there, and meeting him. A rush of sweetness chased all the trouble from her mind. She walked on, picturing this meeting with her lover.

A horse's tread on the road as its rider came up a side turning, the horse reined up at her side, while the rider's "Good-day, Miss Bryant," made her look round and shake hands with Mr. Clifford as he bent down to her from his saddle. She had once liked him very much, and although for some time past he had become uninteresting to her, she had never felt a shadow of dislike to him. To-day, as she turned and faced him, she shivered with disgust.

"I was on my way to Appledore," he said in an indifferent tone; "shall I find your father in, do you think?"

Ruth looked at him as she answered, and his calm,

set face and the coldness of his steady gray eyes reassured her. It was evident that Sally Voce had spoken as she wished, just because the old woman had taken a dislike to Mr. Bevington.

"My father is sure to be in at dinner-time; won't you stay and dine? Then you are sure to see him."

His plain, sensible face brightened, and his grave smile spread over it till he looked singularly genial.

"You are very kind," he said, "but I am pressed for time. If I do not find Mr. Bryant in I must try again, later in the day, as I shall be in the neighborhood. I have a special reason for wishing to see him." He looked grave as he ended, and Ruth felt that his visit was connected with her father's trouble. Formerly she had looked on Mr. Clifford as such a helpful friend, and now the old feeling of reliance came back. She wondered why she had consulted Sally Voce, when she could trust to such a much wiser counsellor.

"Mr. Clifford," she said, "will you tell me something?"

She thought he looked vexed as he answered in a repressive voice:

"Yes, certainly, if I can do so."

She hurried out her words, wondering at her own impulsive confidence.

"Will you tell me how I can help my father? You know about his troubles, I am sure. I—I think of leaving home as a governess or something of the sort. I feel I ought to earn my own living. Can you not help me to find a situation?"

She had fixed her eyes on him as she spoke. He looked suddenly angry. His red-brown face flushed,

and he drew his heavy eyebrows together as he answered:

"The very worst way you could have thought of to help your father. It is, I know, a great comfort to him to have you with him, whether he is in trouble or not. If I were you, Miss Bryant, I would give up the idea of such a thing. Now, if you will excuse me, I will ride on in the hope of finding Mr. Bryant in."

He made her a grave, formal bow, and trotted on to Appledore.

Ruth drew a deep breath as she looked after him.

"How absurd! I do not know which was the greatest goose," she said, laughing; "Sally for inventing her love-story, or I who believed it."

CHAPTER VII.

MR. CLIFFORD'S pace slackened as he drew near Church-Marshfield. He had been greatly upset by Ruth's proposal. He had loved her for years, though for some time past his love had seemed hopeless. A year ago, when Ruth returned from nursing her aunt, he found the girl completely changed. He had never been able to decide whether this change had been caused by Mr. Bevington or by some new friend Ruth had met at Mrs. Whishaw's. Clifford liked Mr. Bevington, and they often rode together; but he thought the pupil was too full of other pursuits, and also too easy-going, to devote himself to Ruth; and yet he could not help feeling at times very jealous of Mr. Bevington's opportunities. But the farmer had consulted Clifford before the pupil's arrival; and together they had arranged the plan of separate meals, and also that Mr. Bevington's evenings should be spent in the study. As a sensible, practical man, Mr. Clifford had felt obliged to acknowledge that the young people could not see much of one another. Clifford's own experience had taught him that Ruth was not addicted to flirting, and that she had plenty of self-respect. It was not likely that she would encourage the attentions of a man in such a totally different position. But then, each time he saw her showed him that she grew more and more

lovely. She might be indifferent to Mr. Bevington, but could the young fellow remain insensible to so much beauty and charm? And he might try to win her love.

With an indefinable perception of his friend's carelessness, Mr. Clifford had made up his mind to warn the farmer of this danger, when the news of Mr. Bevington's sudden departure came as a relief to his anxiety.

Mr. Clifford had seldom seen Ruth in the nine months that had followed. He had gone in October with his invalid sister to the South of France. She had fallen seriously ill on her arrival there, and he had stayed with her, although his business required his presence, and he had been compelled to engage an expensive substitute. When he returned he paid frequent visits to Appledore Farm, but Ruth was almost always out or engaged. She could not have said why, but since she had known Mr. Bevington she had shrunk from meeting her old friend.

The idea of Appledore without Ruth had thoroughly upset him. That so beautiful and innocent a creature should venture alone into the outside world irritated him, for the time, beyond any power of control; and he felt that his only resource was to leave her till he had recovered himself. He had had to take care of his sister Dorothy ever since he was sixteen. His father had been a prosperous farmer, and Michael had expected to help him and eventually to succeed him. He had had a good education at one of the cheaper public schools, and had been sent to an agricultural college. He had there developed an aptitude for land-surveying, and when his father

died not nearly so well off as was expected, Michael soon found a post in an office in Purley. His talent and steady industry helped him greatly, but he had another quality which still more furthered his progress, the rare gift of prompt and also unerring judgment. His self-reliance inspired his clients with confidence. If Michael Clifford willed anything it seemed more than likely that it would come to pass. The only subject on which his wishes and his self-reliance were not in unison, perhaps, was the winning Ruth Bryant's love. He told himself that she was young, and that he must trust to time and to perseverance; but his hope had a tinge of fear. He had longed for a more spontaneous love. It would have helped him if he had been able to ask Miss Bryant to visit Dorothy, who could neither walk nor drive; but when he spoke of this to his sister she said that she did not wish for the acquaintance. Dorothy Clifford was devoted to her brother, but she knew more about his client, Philip Bryant, than he would have thought possible. She thought Michael had done enough in the way of helping others. He had made himself a fine business, and his reputation had spread far beyond his own county. She did not want him to drag himself down with the burden of a spendthrift father-in-law for the sake of a pretty daughter, who no doubt, so Dorothy argued, had done her best to draw Michael on.

Michael Clifford knew that he was sure of a hearty welcome from Bryant, and that he would consent to his proposal for Ruth. But Clifford was proud and delicate. He felt shy of asking Ruth to marry him while her father was so much in his debt. She did

not know it; he was sure of that. He had insisted that his constant loans to Bryant should be kept from her, but he fancied that she might guess at the reason of his frequent visits, and he knew how little reserve there was about Philip Bryant. He could not bear to owe Ruth's consent to her gratitude.

He was skirting the orchard. Already he could see the high peaks of the farm-house gables. It suddenly flashed on him that Philip Bryant was completely ignorant of his attachment to his daughter. He wondered he had not hinted it. The farmer could not be blamed if he gave encouragement to some other likely husband for Ruth, should one present himself.

He turned the angle of the meadow that lay between the orchard and the upper high-road, and then went down the lane that made the approach, walking his horse gently down the steep incline. He knew that he was expected, and he was not surprised to find the farmer at the gate. Michael had always been fond of his old friend, not only because he was Ruth's father; probably, though he was not conscious of the fact, his affection for Bryant had deepened since he had been able to render him so much service. There are men in the world beloved by every one, not so much for any single virtue as for the unfailing sweetness and brightness that characterize them. Possibly Philip Bryant owed a good deal of the universal liking bestowed on him to his winning smile and his sunny light-heartedness. He had unlimited faith in future possibilities. It never occurred to him that past experience might be a safer gauge of the future than the sanguine faith of his expectations.

They walked side by side into the house, and Bryant put his hand on the younger man's shoulder.

"What should I do without you, Clifford?" he said. "Well, you will not lose, my dear fellow. One of these days I hope to repay you in full."

Bryant had given up betting since Michael had taken the management of his affairs, but the last harvest had thrown him back; and as Mr. Bevington was to pay a handsome sum for his two-years' residence, the farmer had gone to a good deal of expense in furniture, etc. When they reached the sitting-room he pointed to a large brown book on the table, and Michael sat down and opened it.

"I shall never keep my accounts to satisfy you," the farmer said, as he saw how grave his friend was. "I had forgotten all those bills till yesterday I found them all together. I wish you would let me hand them over to Ruth. She has a capital head for figures; she keeps her own accounts regularly—not by fits and starts, as I do."

"Does she? But don't you think we had better get this book a little clearer before we hand it over to Miss Bryant?"

"Very well." Bryant was always accommodating, always ready to give up his own will, except on one or two points. "I fancy Ruth is out."

"I met Miss Bryant just now on the Little Marshfield road."

"Ah! I expect she had been to see Sally Voce."

There was a pause. Mr. Clifford pulled out a pocket-book; and then, taking a couple of notes from it, he placed them in the account-book. He was so anxious to save appearances that he had never given

a check to Mr. Bryant. He looked up with a perplexed expression. "I have entered them," he said; then he rose and stood beside the farmer.

"Thank you, very much," Bryant said; "I will pay those bills to-morrow."

"Yes."

Michael's perplexity was gaining ground; he looked distressed.

"I want to say something to you, old friend. Till I saw those ugly bills I had not meant to speak of it. In fact, I meant to talk about something quite different. Do you know, I think this continued struggle is too much for you."

Bryant's lips parted, and his chin dropped.

"I do not understand," he said feebly.

"I ought to have said it six months ago," Clifford went on, as if the farmer had not spoken, "but I was a coward; and, besides, something might have happened to improve matters. Well, it's this: I think you will be happier and wiser if you give up Appledore."

Clifford's lips had lost color while he spoke; he so intensely felt for his companion. If he had been an older man he might have shrunk from giving him this shock, but he knew that he had tried to open Bryant's eyes in a gentler fashion, and that his cheerful optimism had made this impossible.

"Don't let there be any misunderstanding between us," Michael said; "I am willing that things should be as they are at present, so far as feeling goes, but suppose my life drops, then what is to happen not only to you, but to—to Miss Bryant?"

The farmer changed color quickly. He stood nervously rubbing his hands together.

"I—I can't leave Appledore," he said, in a confused, faltering voice; "it—it would kill me."

Clifford walked away and stood by the window that overlooked the farm-yard. He saw Ruth come in by the side gate from the fields. In his hopelessness of getting the farmer to take a real view of his position he felt tempted to appeal to his daughter.

"There is Miss Bryant," he said. "She knows, I fancy, that you are in trouble?"

"Yes, she knows, but what good can she do?" he said irritably. "She proposed to send away a servant, but I said I could not let her do housework. What do you say?"

There was a strange longing in Bryant's eyes. He seemed to wish for something he dared not speak about.

Michael Clifford came back from the window. He felt sure that Ruth had seen him, and yet she had gone on to the back door without noticing him.

"If I had the slightest hope that she would listen to me," he said abruptly, "I should ask Miss Bryant to be my wife. I should have asked her months ago."

Bryant's face beamed with his genial, winning smile.

"And I have always wished for it, my boy." He shook Clifford's hand heartily. "Why are you so hopeless? 'Faint heart—' you know the rest of the saying. I did not feel at all sure when I asked her mother, but I asked her for all that."

"You are still a more attractive man than I am,"

Clifford said gloomily. "Besides, you have the happy temperament that would not be daunted by refusal. I had better be frank, Bryant; I love Ruth so dearly that I dare not risk my chance of happiness till I have some ground for hope. Now," with a sudden change of tone, "good-by! Think over my suggestion about Appledore. I could easily find a tenant, so that the usual term of notice could be got over. Do not trouble to come out with me. Good-by!"

CHAPTER VIII.

RUTH had seen Mr. Clifford, but she was vexed with him for what she considered his want of sympathy with her plan for helping her father. She was not in a mood to be civil to him, and she had therefore come in by the house-place, and had gone straight to her own room. She did not think Mr. Clifford would speak of her proposal, because he had said that her presence was necessary to her father; but the girl had thought over her plan till she had become excited. The idea of holding back from such a sacrifice because it might displease Mr. Bevington she considered purely selfish, and she felt that she had already much selfishness to atone for.

She had begun to wonder whether Mr. Clifford had taken his departure, when Bridget came to say her father wanted her downstairs.

Ruth inquired, and learned that Mr. Clifford had gone away. She was puzzled by the summons; it was so unusual for her father to send for her. A dread of coming evil made her nervous as she went downstairs.

"Yes, father?" she said, as she came in; "what is it? Has anything happened?"

He looked at her with a vague suspicion. He wondered if she had any liking for Clifford.

"Foolish fellow!" he thought; "as if 'twas likely that a high-spirited girl would show a preference for

a man who never made up to her!" He decided to find out the state of her feelings toward him.

"Yes; I have something particular to say. Trouble does not seem to lessen," he said sadly; but he did not meet her loving glance, he felt a little guilty toward his daughter. He was standing, and Ruth pushed him gently into his high-backed chair and seated herself beside him. He cleared his throat with an effort, but before any words could follow Ruth broke in abruptly:

"I never can talk standing," she smiled at him; "but, father, I have thought of a way of saving money, and of getting some perhaps for you—quite an easy way. I did not mean to speak of it till I had found a suitable engagement. Perhaps it is better to tell you."

He stared at her bewildered, and then he looked annoyed.

"An engagement! Do you mean, child, that you contemplate leaving home to take service with other people, with strangers? I told you I would not let you do servant's work, even at home."

Ruth laughed. "Not service, father dear." She put her hand pleadingly on his shoulder. "Don't think me conceited, but I fancy I could teach; and you could not call a teacher a servant, could you?"

"I don't know; there is not much difference if you take other people's money," he answered gloomily. "No, my girl, I cannot listen to such a plan. To begin with, do you suppose I could get along without you? It would be better to give up the farm than to lose you in that way, child."

"Give up the farm!" Ruth echoed dreamily. That

idea would not have occurred to her. It would be the death of her father, she thought, to take him away from Appledore.

"There seems to be no help about it, unless something unforeseen happens. Do you know, Ruth, that I am a mere cipher here? I cannot call a sheep on the place my own. Even the house furniture no longer belongs to me."

Ruth's smile faded; her face was full of alarm.

"O father!" she said, "you ought to have told me; indeed you ought. I do not really think you can oppose my going away."

He was frowning at her.

"You are so wilful!" He spoke fretfully. "What purpose would it serve, except to expose you to annoyance and to make me more anxious and unhappy than I am at present? If you think that your being here causes the slightest extra expense you are greatly mistaken. You think a good deal more about economy than I do, and I tell you the place would quickly go to rack and ruin if you were to leave it."

Ruth sat squeezing her fingers together. She saw that they must leave Appledore, and she longed to propose that her father should at once give up what evidently was no longer his; but her urgency kept her silent. She was so afraid of seeming undutiful at such a time of trial! If she were only free to tell him her secret! She thought it must comfort him to know that her future was secured. Mr. Bevington's last letter had assured her that he was as devoted as ever, and that he only waited for her summons to meet her in the valley.

Her father rose from his chair. He went up to

the high mantel-shelf and aimlessly fingered some china cups that stood there. He began to speak without turning round.

"One thing you seem to forget. If you were to do that sort of thing you would cut yourself off from any chance of a suitable marriage."

A sudden flush spread over Ruth's face. She was thankful that her father still stood facing the mantel-shelf.

"I do not wish to marry."

He looked round quickly. Her tone sounded forced. He noticed her flushed face, and he thought it promised well for Michael Clifford.

"Another thing," he said gravely, but Ruth saw that he had left off frowning, "if anything were to happen to me—I am not long-lived, remember—think how I should feel if I died in debt and left you behind unprovided for!"

"Please, father dear, do not trouble about me!" she said affectionately. "I have had a good, sound education, and I am strong and healthy; no one need trouble about me. And besides, father, I do not see why you need talk in this desponding way. I believe Mr. Clifford's visit has upset you. You must come into the garden with me after dinner, and see how full of promise the fruit trees are; I never saw them so forward. The 'Louise Bonne' will be a sight of blossom."

He shook his head.

"You are wrong about Clifford. He does me good, not harm, child. I do not know what I should do without him. Why don't you come down when he is here, eh, Ruth?"

"I had seen him to-day as I came back from Little Marshfield," she said simply.

"Ah! I remember; so he said. He will call in again before he goes back to Purley, and leave word whether he has found a purchaser for the little bull. Will you not see him then, Ruth? It would please him so much!"

Ruth felt startled. Her father seemed to be asking her to see Mr. Clifford as a personal favor to himself.

"Yes, of course, if you wish it; but I really do not think it gives any special pleasure to Mr. Clifford to see me."

He fancied this was pique.

"I thought as much," he said, smiling in his old genial way. "The foolish fellow has been so afraid of vexing you that he has overshot the mark. Why, child, he loves you dearly—I know it."

Ruth did not flush now; she looked very pale indeed.

"How do you know it?" she said abruptly; "or do you know it? Perhaps you have only fancied it."

Her eagerness for his answer puzzled him.

Instead of teasing her, as he wished, he answered her directly.

"I had my news from headquarters. I guessed it long ago, but he told me so himself just now."

Ruth hung her head. She felt that her answer would pain her father perhaps as much as it would pain Mr. Clifford, for she did not believe he loved her so very much; besides, she thought he must have guessed at her intimacy with Mr. Bevington, or why should he just at that time have left off coming to Appledore?

The silence continued, and she felt that she must speak.

"I am sorry," she said, "but I do not love Mr. Clifford, though I have a very high opinion of him."

Philip Bryant laughed.

"It would be rather strange, my girl, if you owned to loving a man who has never said a word of love to you. Bless you, child! if you like him as you say the rest will come easy. I fancy Michael will soon get you to see things in a different light. It's all right. You shall see him when he comes back; he only meant to leave a message, but that is easily settled."

A panic seized on Ruth. It seemed to her that this had all been planned between her father and his friend, and that unless she protested at once she might find that her consent was taken for granted. A sense of friendlessness oppressed her. She had been accustomed to reckon on her father as so sure an ally that he would, she thought, have stood by her even had she been in the wrong instead of in the right. Surely she was in the right now! Her under lip trembled with a vague doubt. It had been wrong to keep this secret, but surely not wrong to engage herself to her lover; and at the thought Ruth's tender eyes filled with sudden tears. Ah! if he would come and own his love to her father! That would set everything straight, and the secret might be kept; there was no need to trust any one else. A resentful feeling was fast growing toward Mr. Clifford. Ruth believed that he had set her father on to urge her to listen to his suit.

"It is not as you think, father," she tried to speak

in her usual bright way; "I should have said no to Mr. Clifford, even if he had spoken to me himself. I could never marry him; and really, just now I do not want to marry any one."

Her expression puzzled her father; he fancied it lacked the frank earnestness to which he was accustomed.

"I do not want to press you, Ruth," he said, "but I think you ought to know how I stand. I told you that I did not own a head of stock on the farm; I might have said I hardly own the clothes I wear, for nearly a year—longer than that, perhaps—I have lived on borrowed money. I have been obliged to borrow for the repairs, also for the rent; and the security I have given is very unequal to the sums I have received."

Ruth was trembling from head to foot. A terrible sense of degradation had suddenly obscured the moral atmosphere in which she fancied she had lived. She seemed to hear Sally Voce's accusing voice, and her heart sank yet lower. Was it possible that her father had flung away his money as Sally had said, and now wanted to use her as a means of restitution? But the idea was too shocking to her sense of duty to be harbored; she turned from it and rejected it as a direct temptation. A quick remorse followed for having so misjudged her father.

"We must pay this money," she said; "we cannot go on living in debt, can we, dear father?"

Philip Bryant shrugged his shoulders.

"It is easy to talk of paying," he said. "Perhaps you will tell me how we are to do it—to pay all this money?"

Ruth flushed up to her eyes.

"There is a way, I think," she said gently; but she did not look at him. She shrank from seeing the pain she knew he would feel. "Suppose you give up the farm and the house and—and everything to Mr. Clifford? He would no doubt find a purchaser for our things in the in-coming tenant. A farm like Appledore will certainly be easy to let."

He was staring at her. She thought he looked frightened.

"And I should like to know," he said hoarsely, "what is to become of you and me."

"That will all come right," she said cheerfully, carried out of herself by the sacrifice she had proposed. "We shall not be allowed to want. I can work, and you are so clever, father, you might perhaps get an agency, or something of that sort."

Before she ended her father began to walk up and down the room with quick, uncertain steps. Bridget opened the door, put in her head, and announced that dinner was ready; but neither father nor daughter heeded the summons.

At last Bryant came close to her, his eyes and cheeks flaming with anger.

"You would like to turn me into a servant, would you? I, who have been my own master ever since I can remember! How selfish you are, Ruth! and cruel to both of us; for you have been too much indulged to find it easy to take your orders from another person."

He turned away from her, and again walked to the farther end of the room, clasping his hands behind him.

Ruth followed him and put her hand on his shoulder.

"Please do not be angry with me!" she said. "I did not mean to be unkind just now, only I did not find the right way to say it. Kiss me, father dear! Say you are not angry with me!"

Though her voice was full of sorrowful tenderness he had kept his face turned away from her. Now he pushed her away.

"Leave me alone!" he said angrily. "I do not want you; you only want your own way; you would not yield an inch of it to help me; you want to drive me like one of the sheep." Then, as she tried to be heard: "I wish you would go. I prefer to be alone; I don't wish to be disturbed."

Even then his tone was ill-used rather than resolute. He went to the window looking on to the farm-yard and stood there till he heard the door open and close again. He looked round, sighed with relief at finding himself alone, and walking to the fireplace he struck one of the blackening logs fiercely with the poker, till it sent out showers of bright red sparks.

Ruth had gone slowly upstairs. She had a curious feeling of guilt, but she turned from thought of self. Something must be done at once, her young impatience decided. She could not consult with Clifford; she shrank from the idea of seeing him again. All at once she remembered that Mr. Bevington had studied farming a good deal during his stay at Appledore; he would surely be able to give her some advice in regard to the farm. Yes, he must be her best adviser; this was the way in which she veiled

her passionate longing to see him again. The knowledge of Michael Clifford's love seemed to add strength to her own.

She did not hesitate; she sat down at her little table and began to write. She asked her lover to release her from her promise of secrecy. She said that her father was in so much trouble that she could not feel justified in keeping a secret from him, and she knew it would cheer him to learn that her future was assured. She did not speak of Clifford; it seemed useless. She told her lover the joy it would give her to see him again.

A sudden cry startled her; she hurried to the door and listened. This time she heard distinctly.

"Miss Bryant! Miss Ruth! Come! come quick!"

It was Bridget's voice, and Ruth hurried downstairs hardly knowing what she expected to find there.

The sitting-room door stood open, and Ruth paused a moment before she went in. Her father lay on the floor; he looked rigid and lifeless. Bridget stood beside him, so overcome with terror that she had not even unfastened the tie he wore round his throat.

"He's gone!" the woman cried as Ruth came in; "the poor soul's gone and we're too late to save him!"

CHAPTER IX.

BRIDGET stood still, aghast at her young mistress' promptitude.

Ruth knelt down beside her father and loosened his tie and shirt, and then bid the trembling, terrified woman fetch John Bird and Peter, the cowman. She had seen them both in the yard when she came in, and she knew they must be near at hand. With all her outward calm Ruth could not think. Time seemed very long to her while she knelt beside her insensible father, listening now and then for the beating of his heart, but unable to detect a sign of life. At last there came the dull sound of heavy, lumbering feet, and the two men entered awkwardly, one after another. Their sheepishness fled, however, as they saw their master lying on the floor. Ruth pointed to the sofa, and they carefully raised Mr. Bryant and placed him there.

"Peter," Ruth looked at the cowman, a small, twisted creature whose face seemed to be forever trying to straighten itself, "I want you to saddle Peggy at once, and to fetch the doctor. Be as quick as you can! And, Bird, will you go and ask Mrs. Voce to come directly? You can tell her what has happened. It might be better to take the horse and cart for her, if it's handy."

The men pulled their forelocks, said "Yes, miss," and departed, wondering in their slow, silent way at Miss Ruth's composure and at her readiness.

Their "missuses" would have been eventually helpful, but they would have spent many precious moments in pity and wonder. Perhaps, on the whole, with all their admiration for Miss Bryant's composure and promptitude, they considered her a trifle hard-hearted.

Ruth stood beside the sofa watching the insensible figure. She had already tried all the simple remedies she knew about, but there was a new look in her father's face that frightened her in spite of her efforts to be self-controlled. There was such a total want of expression in it, and she fancied that the mouth was drawn slightly to one side. A horror seized her—suppose her father never recovered his senses! Suppose he were taken away while she was still keeping this secret from him! Could she ever be happy again, with the consciousness that she had deceived him? Her face contracted with pain, till it looked small and pinched, as she stood waiting the return of her messengers. She started as Bridget came in suddenly; she held up her hand as a warning to be careful.

"Mr. Clifford's here, miss," the woman said; "he met John Bird, miss, and he wants to know if you'll see him, or if he can be of use."

"Ask him to walk in."

Her momentary impulse had been to shrink from seeing Clifford, but she went forward to meet him as cordially as if she had not already seen him in the morning.

She pointed to the sofa. Clifford bent over Philip Bryant, and assured himself that he still breathed.

He told Ruth this.

"I hear you have sent for the doctor," he added, "but he may be out, and I shall perhaps find him more quickly than your messenger; shall I try?"

"Thank you very much; you are sure to bring him more quickly."

Clifford only nodded in answer as he left the room, and before she thought he could have mounted his horse she heard the sound of a sharp trot up the lane. Mrs. Voce soon arrived, before the doctor did. She looked at Mr. Bryant, screwed her lips with mysterious importance, and then she turned her attention to Ruth.

"Mercy me, Miss Bryant! We don't want two sick people in the house at once, sure enough; and we shall have them safe as the bank, if you don't mind yourself. You look as faint and as white as——"

Bridget had stayed in the room, and she now interrupted:

"And 'tis no wonder, Mrs. Voce. Miss Bryant hasn't had nothing to eat since breakfast, no more but what the poor master haven't, neither."

Mrs. Voce bustled out of the room, followed by the approving Bridget. When the old woman came back with a glass of wine and bread and butter, she persuaded Ruth to swallow a few mouthfuls before the doctor came.

The doctor sent every one out of the room but Mr. Clifford. He made a long examination of his patient before he spoke.

"It is a very serious attack," he said gravely. "I think he may come round, but he won't do it in a hurry. Meantime he must stay here."

Clifford went to the door, and found Ruth, as he expected, close at hand. She came into the room, and the doctor repeated his opinion.

"You must leave him where he is, Miss Bryant," he said. "That old-fashioned sofa does as well as a bed for a man who cannot move. I see you have placed his head comfortably. Ah! I'm glad to see Mrs. Voce," he added pompously. He lowered his voice as he finished his instructions.

Ruth walked away to the farther end of the room, and the doctor followed her. She had that special sort of magnetism which seemed to draw people to do as she wished, even when the wish was not expressed.

"Dr. Buchan," she said softly, "do you think my father will get well? Please tell me the truth!"

The doctor put his high-colored face on one side, and looked doubtfully at Miss Bryant. He so greatly admired her that, although Ruth was perfectly unconscious of his admiration, Mrs. Buchan was secretly jealous of the praise lavished by her husband on Miss Bryant. The doctor was extremely pompous, but he was skilful and kind-hearted. He considered that Miss Bryant's question was a breach of professional etiquette, but there was so keen an expression of suffering in her sweet, dark eyes that his answer came almost without his will.

"I think he will recover his senses," he said, "though perhaps not for some hours to come; but I am afraid he will never be quite the same man again."

His voice became graver as he ended. "Indeed, I hardly think he will recover the use of his limbs;" then, more cheerfully, "Look here, Miss Bryant! I would advise you to divide this room by means of a screen or curtains; keep the sofa where it is; that front end of the room gets the sunshine, and is more out of the reach of sounds from the farm-yard. Yes, it will be better in every way to do this. Good-by! I will come and see him early to-morrow."

Clifford saw the doctor to the door and then he came back.

"At the hotel," he said, "they have a very large screen; shall I borrow it for you? It will help in dividing the room. I wish you would tell me anything I can do. I shall, of course, ride over to-morrow."

Ruth did not answer at once; she stood looking at the insensible figure on the sofa. At last she said:

"You have already done much to help us, thank you. I think we have all that will be needed to carry out the doctor's orders. In a few days I shall be very glad to ask your advice, if you will kindly give it me." His heart beat with a rising hope, but she looked so very grave, that he felt she wished him to leave her. He went out by the house-place, so as to get a few words with Mrs. Voce.

"I do not half like going away," he said; "you had better let Bird sleep in the house, Mrs. Voce. You may want help, you know."

"Thank you, I'm sure, sir, for being so thoughtful," said the imperturbable Sally; "but you may be quite easy on that account, sir. We're three females and a slip of a girl, to say nothing of Miss Ruth,

who's worth all on us put together. Don't you take on about us, sir! Us 'll do first-rate."

Ruth sat thinking over the doctor's words. It was so sad to feel that nothing could be done, except just a few little trifling things, until there was some sign of returning consciousness. Her thoughts went on to that afterward, and she shrank away with dismay from the thought of her father's future. It was plain they could not remain at Appledore, for though Ruth fancied she might be able to manage with the help of the men who had so long been at work on it, she now knew that there was no money. She felt, indeed, that they were in debt perhaps beyond her power to repay what was owing. Who were her father's creditors? she wondered. She flushed at the certainty she felt that one of them was Mr. Clifford. As she recalled her talk with her father she shrank from consulting this true friend, lest he should attribute her confidence in him to a warmer feeling. She shivered as the thought returned that her decided refusal to encourage Clifford's hopes had helped in causing her father's seizure. "I could not have said anything else," she thought.

She sat like a statue, thinking of what lay before her. Only yesterday she had felt like an expectant child, in the gladness of her outlook on life. It seemed now as if she could not look forward. A gray, obscuring veil had fallen over her future. At last her thoughts resolved themselves into shape out of the mental chaos in which she had been groping. Her plan for an independent livelihood was completely shattered. Her place in life must be beside her father; but she knew that this could not be at

Appledore. She must ask Mr. Clifford to give notice to the owners, and she must also ask him where she could find a cheap cottage for them to live in. She paused and reflected that as yet she did not know whether there would be money to pay even the rent of a cottage. She could not submit to be dependent on Mr. Clifford, or on any one, so long as she had health and strength. She had no friend near at hand to advise with. The rector of Church-Marshfield was an old bachelor, who lived shut up with his books. He was kind and attentive to the very poor and to the sick, but he was essentially a village pastor, incapable of giving advice in any secular matter out of his own narrow sphere. Ruth thought she would write to her Aunt Whishaw and ask her to advise her, but she did not fancy that she should get much help in that quarter. Of course the one reliable person to consult with was Mr. Clifford, but the longer she thought about him the more distinctly did she realize the full meaning of Sally Voce's hints, and of her father's appeal with regard to this trusty friend. Ruth felt that if she did not love Mr. Bevington it would not be difficult to bring herself to care for Michael, but the idea was at present repulsive. The shadows slowly gathered in the corners of the long room, while she sat there thinking. Suddenly a new thought came to help her. Why did she not tell Mr. Bevington what had happened, and trust herself to his guidance. He had told her more than once that he loved farming, and that he should like to possess a small farm like Appledore and try upon it some of his ideas, instead of feeling obliged to follow in the beaten track as her father did.

She was ignorant of his resources, except that he must before long come into a large fortune, which would make him independent of his parents. Ruth detested the idea of obligation, but she knew that she would rather consult with Mr. Bevington than with Michael Clifford, and Mr. Bevington understood the practical working of the farm far better than Mr. Clifford could. It was possible that her lover might offer to purchase Appledore and let her father continue to rent the house. She suddenly shook herself. How unnatural she was! How could she yield herself to this pleasant day-dream while her father lay there looking so much more like death than life?

She rose and rang the bell. She dared not leave the room, even for an instant; and she had just remembered that at Bridget's sudden outcry she had left her letter to Mr. Bevington open on her writing-table.

Mrs. Voce came in with a stealthy step; her firmly closed mouth and the depressed corners of her lips had a funereal aspect which, to say the least, was not cheering at such a time.

"Yes, miss; is there any change?" she said solemnly.

Ruth asked her to take her place while she went to get her letter-case. It occurred to the girl as she went upstairs that for this once she must trust one of the men to post her letter. She had always had an uneasy consciousness with regard to the postmistress, but she argued that possibly the woman did not know her handwriting; and more than once Ruth had managed to meet the postman on his way to Purley.

"If there is to be gossip, there must be," she said, with a sort of defiance. "It must be my duty to tell him what has happened, and to say I must tell father the truth as soon as he can understand."

Either the doubt implied in the words, or the relief of finding herself alone, caused her suddenly to break down in sobs and tears; and she hurriedly gathered up her writing things, as if she feared her dearly loved father might pass away while she was absent.

She asked Mrs. Voce to stay and watch while she wrote at the table in the window. Her letter to Mrs. Whishaw was soon finished, but it took her longer to explain matters to Mr. Bevington. "If you could only come and see me," she wrote, "it would be so much easier to talk it all out than to write. You would, I am sure, advise me so much better than any one else can. Indeed, there is no one else who could help me, except Mr. Clifford; and I do not want to ask him."

She went out into the yard and found John Bird leaving work.

He asked after the master, told Miss Bryant not to mind sending for him in the night if she found she needed help. "I'd do a heap more nor that for 'ee," he said doggedly. He then set off with the letters for Church-Marshfield post-office.

CHAPTER X.

BEVINGTON PARK was also in the West of England, though it was a long way removed from Appledore. It was a lovely place near the river Severn. Its fertile farms stretched far and wide, its richly wooded park was varied by uplands and well stocked with deer. At intervals between the tall forest trees glimpses of the Welsh hills, and on the other side the green, smooth-shaped Wrekin—at mid-day a solid protuberance, without any special claim to admiration, but in the evening light hazy and vision-like, seeming as if it would fade out of ken of the gazer. The house, however, at Bevington was far more remarkable than the park. It was an old, gabled dwelling, in which it was said that Queen Elizabeth had once slept. On one side of it an ancient walnut-tree stretched its branches to such a circumference that they had to be supported by stout fir poles, while on the other side the lawn was shadowed by cedar-trees. A border gay with spring flowers was filled at the back with rose-trees.

Mr. Bevington was pacing up and down the terrace above this border and just below the beautiful old windows of the drawing-room. He looked considerably older, and not nearly so happy as he had looked at Appledore.

A figure came softly into the window and looked at him through the small lozenge-shaped panes, the

figure of a tall woman with a small, pale face. Mrs. Bevington was paler than her son, but he was singularly like her. There was the same pinched expression in the thin lips; the eyes, too, were alike in form and color, though Mrs. Bevington's had rather a furtive than a mischievous expression. Both nose and chin showed a determination that was wanting in the young man's face. He passed the window again, and saw his mother standing there. He frowned, and muttered impatiently:

"Why can she not leave me alone? I said I must not be pressed;" he saw the lattice open, and he paused before it. "Do you want me, mother?" he said.

"Well, yes, if you can spare me a few minutes."

The young fellow sighed with vexation, but he went indoors.

He found his mother seated beside the fire in a large room with oak-panelled walls. The handsome plaster ceiling was of the same date as the rest of the house. The hearth was open, and above it the richly carved oak chimney-piece reached to the ceiling. About the room, in striking contrast with the gloom of the dark walls, were a great many quaint, spindle-legged tables; and upon almost all of these stood groups of carefully arranged pot-flowers and delicate ferns. There were larger tables covered with books and photographs; among these were slender vases filled with cut flowers. These last seemed to be less in harmony with the old-world place than was the tall, proud figure and the pale, passionless face of the lady beside the hearth.

"I want to order the carriage, dear," she said in a

soft, purring tone that soothed her son's impatient mood. "You will drive with me to Castle Stretton?"

Reginald Bevington stood looking into the fire, softly stroking his silky mustache with the forefinger of his left hand. He knew very well the meaning of his mother's question, and he also understood the importance attached to his answer. He had travelled a good deal after he left Appledore—had spent several weeks in Paris and in Vienna—and he had been very extravagant. When he came home he learned that his godfather, an old man whom he had supposed unlikely to live many months longer, had suddenly recovered his health. He now wrote to announce his marriage with a comparatively young woman, his vicar's daughter, who had been, he wrote, "a ministering angel to him during his long illness."

This was startling news, especially as his mother assured Reginald Bevington that his godfather was not much over sixty, and, if he really had regained his health, might be expected to live for some years.

So long as there had been no doubt of his succession to his godfather's fortune, which was a large one, his father had been very indulgent in regard to his son's whims, and also to his apparent inability to keep within his income; but this news caused a complete revolution in the ideas of both father and mother respecting him. They were not a united couple. Mrs. Bevington had been an heiress, who had been married for the sake of her money rather than for any personal or mental charm she possessed; but on this point—that Reginald must really settle and make a rich marriage—they were as united as

they had been in removing him from Appledore, and from the dangerous fascination of Ruth Bryant. His father and mother had not spoken to him about Ruth. When he came home they had borne his discontent and ill-humor in silence; and when at the end of the London season he proposed to go abroad, they were extremely kind and liberal in forwarding his plans. Now everything had changed. As Reginald was an only son, and Mrs. Bevington was amply provided for, they had lived showily—indeed, quite up to their income. The past season had been unusually expensive; and although Mrs. Bevington had rejoiced in her son's prolonged stay in Vienna, and had told her husband that the surest way of blotting out his fancy for the farmer's daughter would be found in a foreign *liaison*, which was sure not to last, she looked sharply after money, and considered it wasted when it did not serve any practical purpose. She intended her son to stand for the county at the next election; this would require a larger outlay, and she had little hope that Reginald would give up his extravagant habits. He must marry money. At Castle Stretton, only eight miles away, there was the very girl to suit him; a girl who had cared for him ever since she first saw him, and on whom Mrs. Bevington had looked as her future daughter. Miss Stretton was plain; she was short, and she had delicate health; she was also a year or so older than Reggy was; but she had plenty of money; and Mrs. Bevington argued a marriage was seldom a fit in every way—a large fortune and a good temper were immense advantages.

Reginald stood thinking over all his mother had said, both with reference to Clara Stretton and also

about his father's inability to increase his present allowance. He knew that all the advice she had given him was sensible and well-founded; he had always been told that he had better marry Clara Stretton, and yet he turned from the idea of her as if he were still a child and she were a dose of nasty physic. And then he decided to let himself drift. He could not be forced into an engagement against his will; and even if he did ask Miss Stretton to marry him, he could make the engagement last as long as he pleased. At his age he was not going to tie himself up with a wife and family.

"Yes, mother," he said; "I am willing to go with you."

Mrs. Bevington rose. She was almost as tall as her son as she stood beside him; and she kissed his cheek, as she said in her most soothing tone: "Dear boy, how sensible you are! I cannot tell you how happy you make me!"

He drew himself quickly away. The motto of his life had always been to shirk all that was disagreeable or troublesome; and although he longed to tell his mother that she was taking the matter far too seriously, he had a dim consciousness that this might produce a scene, or at any rate some plain statement of facts, which he had resolved to avoid. He had lived too much with his mother not to have much insight into her nature; but he had once or twice noticed that, in spite of her outward fastidiousness, and the refinement she exacted from others, she could be unflinchingly plain-spoken—almost what in another person he would have called coarse—in her way of stating facts.

His mother's mental sight seldom erred respecting him. She now went to her writing-table, and opening a locked drawer she took out several papers tied together and put them into her son's hand.

"I have to see the housekeeper," she said. "I will say three for the carriage. You will have time to look through these. Your father is greatly puzzled as to what can be done about them. The last audit was so bad, you see, that we have had to be very careful. I think we must stay here a month later than usual. As you know, I usually go to town before Easter."

Reginald Bevington knew very well what the papers were, and as he closed the door on his mother he could hardly keep back the groan which he indulged in as he placed himself in her chair beside the hearth.

He mechanically opened the parcel of papers. He saw with annoyance that only half the accounts against him were paid; the others were fastened together, and on them was a slip in his father's handwriting to the effect that Reginald must settle these himself, his father having done as much as lay in his power. The young fellow felt furious; he was sure that his mother could have helped him if she had chosen. He started up, and for some minutes he paced the room, almost beside himself with anger.

He had no intention of paying his own debts. It seemed to him that it was distinctly the part of a parent to relieve a child of any trouble or embarrassment. It was the first time he had been made to feel dependent on any one, and the sensation was new and embarrassing.

It was all the fault of his godfather. Confound him! what right had he to let Reginald consider himself heir to a large property, and then to commit the self-indulgence of marrying a young woman?

All at once he remembered Ruth Bryant. What a lucky escape he had had! If he had not been so suddenly summoned home it seemed to him, as he recalled his own infatuation for her, that he might have found himself engaged to Ruth. As it was she had set him free from any engagement. He wished, however, she had continued to write to him, though; her letters were so bright and fresh, and it gave him, he knew, an exquisite pleasure to read in them the assurance of her affection for him.

"She was beautiful, if you like! I can't give up such a charming girl," he said to himself, as he stood looking dully out on to the lawn. "I must see her again some day, whatever happens. She is something like a girl! with no thought of self about her. That last time in the glen her eyes told me how she could love a fellow." He smiled at himself for his own reticence on that occasion. He had grown so much older since that meeting, and he told himself he knew so much more about women and their ways. He decided to write to Ruth and ask her to give him a meeting. At this point the butler came in to announce the carriage, and when a few minutes later Mrs. Bevington appeared she was agreeably surprised to find her son in so calm and pleasant a mood. She had expected that the message conveyed by the unpaid bills would have greatly disturbed him. She made herself very agreeable during the drive, talked on the subjects which she knew had

any particular interest for him, and then as they approached Stretton Castle she busied herself in pointing out to him the excellent farming on the estate and the value of the land attached to it.

"There is plenty of room on this land," she said, "for any one to try agricultural experiments. Old Mr. Stretton, as you know, is a mere book-worm; and he allows the bailiff to take his own way, and that of course in the old hum-drum style of things."

Reginald looked about him; it certainly did seem to be a fine place—not so picturesque, perhaps, as Bevington was, but larger and grander; and he knew that the acreage was far more considerable.

"Your father tells me," his mother said, "that the Strettons have a large property in Somersetshire beside this one."

Reginald looked at the park beyond his side of the avenue up which they were driving, and he smiled at his mother's apparent unconsciousness. She meant it very well, no doubt, but she was a trifle too transparent, he considered.

"What do you suppose the fair Clara is likely to have, altogether?" he said abruptly.

"I know she has five thousand a year of her own, left her by that extraordinary Welsh grandfather; and of course at Mrs. Stretton's death Clara takes the rest of her grandfather's fortune; I am told that it has been simply left to accumulate. You see, the Strettons have been rich for generations, and they have always had very small families. Clara cannot come into less than half a million when her father dies, and I understand he will make very handsome settlements if she marries to please him."

Reginald smiled mockingly at his mother.

"He may possibly be very hard to please."

"You have no reason to think so,"—she looked at him so directly that his eyes drooped. "He has told your father, and Mrs. Stretton has told me, how much they like you, and how fitted they consider you to manage a large property. I believe it has always been Mr. Stretton's hobby to join these two estates; the property that lies between is so small that it can be easily annexed when the present holder dies. It is only leased, as you know. Your father says the owner, a Scotchman, is willing to sell it."

"By Jove!" Reginald exclaimed, "here comes a good horse and a good rider."

As he spoke a horse vaulted lightly over a gate some thirty yards in front, and his rider, a lady, looked for an instant perfectly serene and unmoved, as she bent a little forward and patted the graceful creature's neck. She looked up, and as she recognized the occupants of the approaching carriage she blushed deeply, and drew on one side as if she hoped to escape notice.

But already both mother and son were bowing to her, and in a minute or so the carriage stopped. While Reginald complimented Miss Stretton on her horse, Mrs. Bevington said to herself, with a satisfied smile:

"If I had planned it all myself with the greatest care it could not have happened in a better or more taking way."

CHAPTER XI.

THREE weeks had gone by since Ruth sent off her letter to Mr. Bevington, and as yet it had not been answered. Her father had slowly regained consciousness, and he was now able to sit up; but his left leg was useless, and his face was still slightly drawn. The doctor told Ruth that as the weather became warmer her father might possibly recover the use of his leg; he also told her that the invalid must be kept free from worry or discussion of any kind. Ruth had listened in silence. It was evident that her father could not be moved in his present state. She had begun to think that Mr. Bevington did not mean to answer her letter; he might possibly be travelling, but she could no longer delay. Only this morning she had most unwillingly determined that after all she must consult Mr. Clifford. She had scarcely seen him alone since her father's seizure, though he had come every day to the farm. This morning, however, Mrs. Voce and Faith had been busy arranging the study as a bedroom for Mr. Bryant, and while he sat close to the window in the May sunshine Ruth was trying to make her sitting-room look more like itself. Helped by tall, strong Sally Voce and a stout crutch-stick, the invalid could now manage to cross the hall; and the doctor had pronounced that his patient would be all the better for the change.

Mr. Bryant spoke very little to any one, even to Clifford. He seemed glad, when his friend came, after the first greetings, to be left in peace. He listened to the talk between Clifford and Ruth, but he rarely joined in it; and his daughter fancied that he liked best to be left undisturbed. To-day, after dinner, he went to his room and lay down; and Ruth felt relieved. She was almost sure that Mr. Clifford would come, as he had not been at Appledore yesterday; and when she had seen that her father was comfortably asleep she stood by the front window of the sitting-room, nerving herself to say what lay so heavily on her mind. Formerly she could have said anything to Mr. Clifford, but now she was self-conscious on two different points: he was their benefactor, and she had reason to believe that he loved her.

She began to feel shy. She crossed the room and opened her pianoforte, which had remained closed all through her father's illness. She had a passionate love of music, and she had had a fair amount of instruction, which had helped her natural gift; but while Mr. Bevington was at Appledore her music had been entirely neglected. She had gone back to it with fresh ardor when he left; it seemed to blend with the thought of him; it took her away, too, from anxious meditation about the future. Ruth had an excellent memory, and could play without music; and now she felt herself in a sort of happy dreamland, as she played old favorite melodies that she had learned years ago—bits from Mendelssohn and from "*Les Nuits Blanches*," and then unconsciously her fingers wandered into the pathetic notes of Schubert's "*Adieu*."

She suddenly left off playing. She wondered why, on this day especially, when she might have been glad to see her beloved father so far recovered, she should have chosen this sad music. Was it a warning, she wondered, that they should soon have to take their leave of Appledore? She left the pianoforte and went again to the window. She was growing impatient to hear Mr. Clifford's opinion of their position.

This time she had not long to wait. It was one of those mockingly bright days which seem to be a parody of summer; they have all belonging to it except its warmth. A keen east wind was searing the edges of the fresh green leaves and nipping the fruit blossoms. Mr. Clifford usually rode into the farmyard and left his horse there; and Ruth went across to the back window to see if he had arrived. He was standing there talking to John Bird and Peter. The two men faced the window, and she could see that they looked troubled. She went back to her former place and waited. She felt sure they should have to leave the farm, and that Mr. Clifford had come to tell her they must go.

He came in looking very cheerful.

"This is good news," he said; "Mrs. Voce has been telling me of your patient's move. I believe we shall soon have him in the garden if he continues to progress at this rate."

Ruth pointed to the sofa, and took a chair opposite him.

"Yes, he is much better," she said. "I am so glad to see you alone; I want to ask you something."

He looked eagerly at her, but she kept her eyes

fixed on his without any sign of consciousness; her lips quivered slightly, but she did not seem nervous, he thought.

"I want to know," she went on, "what you think we had better do when we leave Appledore; we have to leave it, you know."

"Your father has told me so, but I see no occasion for hurry."

Ruth gave him a sudden indignant glance; he spoke so coldly, so indifferently, she thought, when he must know the pain it gave her to talk about leaving the place she had been born in.

"Why should we delay?" she said, sharply, he fancied; "if it has to be done, the sooner it is over the better."

"Your father is not well enough to move yet," he said.

He had been longing to see her alone, and to get a few words with her. He was determined not to let her guess at his attachment till her father's affairs were in a more settled state, but he had not reckoned on the strength of his passion for her. It was as much as he could do to keep silence on the subject, and the effort gave unintentional stiffness and coldness to his manner which deeply wounded her.

"My father," she said in a hard voice, "can be moved now. We may have to wait months for him to be able to walk, even if he ever recovers the use of his leg. I am sorry to trouble you, Mr. Clifford, but I do not know any one else who can advise me. I want to know whether we must give notice to the landlord, or what we have to do."

He was looking anxiously at her, but she went on

in the same hard tone: "I also want to know—I fancy you can tell me—if we have anything of our own to live on when we leave Appledore. The doctor says I must not talk to my father about business." She spoke as if she were repeating a lesson. There are moments when Nature is so much wiser than we poor mortals esteem ourselves to be. Michael Clifford longed to ask Ruth to go back to the old friendly terms and to put full confidence in him; but he also longed to declare his love, and to put everything he possessed at her disposal. He could not offer her a mere brotherly friendship when he was filled with ardent love, and so it seemed wise to him to take a middle course. He was unconscious in the stern effort to repress his feelings how very unsympathetic he appeared.

"So far as I know of Mr. Bryant's affairs," he said, and even then he tried to speak indifferently, lest her keen wits should discover how much he knew, "I am sure that you will be able to rent a comfortable cottage. If you will allow me, I will speak to Dr. Buchan, but I am almost sure that he will say wait till summer really comes. The weather has been hitherto so cold and wet, so different from last year, that we may reasonably hope for a fine August. If you like, I will try to find you a cottage by August."

She looked dissatisfied.

"I cannot think it will hurt my father to move sooner," she said coldly; "except for his lameness he seems fairly well. I imagine that the doctor objects to his talking about business because he fears the effect on his brain. I fancy a change of surroundings would be good for him just now."

Clifford smiled; and, as if a new idea had just come to him, he said warmly: "Will you trust your father to our care? My sister is always an invalid, but she is not dull; and I am sure she would take good care of Mr. Bryant. Do let us have him! It would be a rest for you to have a little quiet after your anxious nursing."

"You are very good," she said gratefully, for his kindness touched her, though the proposal troubled her; she was so sure that they already owed much to Mr. Clifford, that she shrank from increasing the debt. It had, however, shown her that this old friend was not as indifferent as he seemed; and she added that she would speak to her father.

"Thank you," Clifford said.

She looked up and hesitated. "I have no right to bother you," she said, "but do you not think I may lessen our expenses without waiting till I can speak to father? I want to send away all unnecessary help. Mrs. Voce has promised to stay here until we leave Appledore, so that really we need very little help besides."

He was greatly surprised. He had been accustomed to look on Ruth as the light and sunshine of the home rather than in a more domestic character. Even when she had spoken of her wish to go out in the world he had considered her unreal; and also he had fancied that she was tempted by the prospect of change. It was grievous, he thought, that this beautiful bright creature should be so early burdened with the sordid cares of life.

"You are too young to have such things put on you," he said impatiently. "Why not go on as you

are till you move? Then you can start as you mean to go on. I am afraid in this large house you cannot manage with fewer servants, and—and it would grieve,” he paused, and then said, “grieve your father extremely if he discovered that you did any household work yourself.”

Ruth laughed in her old bright way.

“I have a better opinion of my father than that; besides, ever since his illness began I have dusted his bedroom diligently, and he never made an objection, I am sure. Many women in a far better position than mine help with the housework,” she said triumphantly.

He looked at her hands and he sighed. The idea of seeing this beautiful girl, his own precious Ruth, hard-worked, robbed of her well-kept, dainty aspect, was very unpleasant; but he could not find any better reason against her plan than those he had already given.

“I fancy you will take your own way, whatever happens.”

He did not mean to speak coldly, but his voice sounded harsh and full of rebuke. Tears sprang to Ruth's eyes, at what she considered his persistent unkindness. Her cheeks flushed, and she closed her lips firmly.

She had always done this as a child when she was vexed, and Clifford knew it. He forgot his resolution to avoid all emotional subjects. It was time for him to leave her, but he could not go away and leave her angry with him.

“You are not vexed, Ruth?”

She flushed yet more deeply, and he thought she

looked haughty. He had called her Ruth years ago, and it had seemed natural that he should do so. To-day she thought it a freedom, and she resented it not so much for herself as because she felt sure it would give offence to Mr. Bevington that any one else should call her by her name.

"I am not vexed, Mr. Clifford," she said stiffly, "but I think, if you will excuse me, that I ought to go and see after my father; he has been a long time asleep."

"Good-by!" He held her hand a moment, and looked wistfully at her. "Then you will think over that idea of trusting us with your father? It would be a great pleasure to us."

"Thank you, I will tell my father of your kindness."

She said this more cordially, but though she came out into the hall to see him depart, Michael Clifford felt that somehow he was farther away from Ruth Bryant than he had been at the beginning of his visit.

CHAPTER XII.

RUTH was glad when bed-time came; she had never felt so troubled. She had been perplexed with a dim sense of wrong-doing when Mr. Bevington had asked her to keep their love secret from her father, but there had been the delicious opium, the consciousness of her own love, and her faith in her lover, to deaden her sense of wrong-doing. To-day she felt herself to be wholly in the wrong; she had been unjust, and also most ungrateful to this kind old friend. She had no right to judge Michael Clifford by his manner when he had given so many proofs of his warm and true friendship. How kind, how even devoted, he had been during her father's illness! How grateful she had promised herself to be to him when on the evening of her father's seizure he had come again late in the evening, bringing the screen he had procured for her! He had ridden beside the cart himself, to make sure that the driver, who was a stranger, should not disturb the household. And since then, Ruth thought, as she went over the days that had passed, each day had shown him to be an ever mindful and generous friend.

The point that touched the girl most in the consideration of all his kindnesses was the delicacy that pervaded them. He had always parried her thanks with some ready excuse. The doctor had suggested this, or the rector had proposed the other. Some-

times the idea, he said, had come from Sally Voce. He had never troubled Ruth by proposing this or that; he had done it for her without asking. And to-day she had rewarded him for all his goodness by a cold, even an angry manner in receiving his advice—advice for which she had herself asked.

Before she fell asleep that night she cried over her own ingratitude. She had been vexed with Mr. Clifford's cold manner; and, she told herself, all the while her own had been icy; and when in the goodness of his heart he had called her Ruth—perhaps to recall her to the memory of old times, when she knew she had been much kinder to him—she had actually been mean enough to be offended. She hid her hot face in her pillow; she was desperately ashamed of her conduct, and, as she thought over it, it grew worse in her eyes, for she believed that it had been caused by self-consciousness. She might have known better; indeed she had more than once told herself during these weeks that her dear father had been self-deceived; he had spoken as he wished when he had assured her that Clifford loved her. Ruth decided that it was impossible that he could have hidden his feelings so completely in the many meetings they had had since her father's seizure. Why, then, having more than once acknowledged this to herself, had she been so silly as she had been to-day?

She slept badly, and was glad to wake and rise early.

Her father looked troubled when she took him his breakfast, but he said he was as well as usual. At dinner-time, however, he looked so pale and anxious that Ruth felt alarmed, and questioned him.

"It is nothing," he said; "I had a bad dream, and I have been thinking about it. I think I will dine here instead of going to the house-place. I am tired, that's all, my girl; and I want to be alone. Kiss me, darling, and come to me when you have had your dinner."

"You won't have your nap, then?"

"No, I want to talk to you first, child; let Sally bring me my dinner."

Ruth wondered a little, but it seemed to her that this talk would give her an opportunity of proposing her father's visit to Purley. She did not want him to go there, but she felt bound to use her strongest powers of persuasion, as a sort of atonement for her unkindness to Michael Clifford; for, with the exaggeration of a generous nature, she had now put her old friend in a higher place than he had perhaps ever occupied in her regard.

She had soon finished her meal, and she stood leaning out of the open window of the house-place, wishing that the heavy gray clouds would lift, or give some hope that they meant to break. The air was still and heavy, too damp for thunder, or she might have dreaded a storm. Presently Ruth walked across the big, bare room to the door that led into the farmyard. She had not been out this morning, for she had been engaged with Sally Voce, settling that the old woman and the girl Faith should in future keep the house between them. It was a relief to have carried out her plans for economy, Mrs. Voce being willing to shut up her cottage for the time that her services would be required at Appledore. Ruth was bringing up a brood of young bantams, and she

wanted to see if they had been properly fed in her absence from the poultry yard. There had always been an excellent dairy woman at Appledore, and Ruth had never interfered with her. She had not a turn for butter-making, but she dearly loved young stock of all kinds; and she was especially fond of rearing poultry.

As she opened the door she heard her name called, and looking over her shoulder she saw Mrs. Voce coming into the house-place.

"Your papa's a-asking for you, Miss Ruth; he don't seem wishful for a nap this afternoon. I've helped he on to the sofa, and now I'm off home to see how things are going."

Ruth nodded; she said nothing about the bantams to Sally, being well aware that the good woman would consider it necessary to give the little creatures food whether they required it or not.

Philip Bryant was looking paler than usual, and there was a sad expression in his eyes as he fixed them on Ruth.

"Sit down, child," he said, as she stood bending over the fire; "I have a good deal to say to you, and it is better not to put it off. No one knows how soon the end may come!"

The words gave Ruth a shock, but she smiled as she placed herself with her back to the light.

"The doctor says you are to have a wheel-chair when the weather is dryer; and then you can sit out in the garden. You see, dear," she went on brightly, "you are so accustomed to live in the open air, that this long confinement to the house has naturally depressed you."

He shook his head. "Come and sit here, darling," he said affectionately; "I like to see your face, and I can't when your back is to the light." He waited while she moved, and then he went on again, "I do not think I shall be long here, Ruth, in spite of what the doctor may say. Dr. Buchan has only attended me a matter of four years or so; I must know best. I am not grieved to think it, child, except on your account. I wish," his voice was trembling so that he paused to steady it before he went on—"I wish I had been a better father to you, child; and I wish, too, that your sweet mother had not been taken away from me just when I wanted her most. It is too late for all that now. There's an old saying, 'Tis no use to cry over spilt milk;' what I have got to do in the time that is left, is to plan out your future."

"Now," Ruth smiled brightly, "you are naughty; you are trying to do just what the doctor cautioned you against. You are trying to worry your dear self, and you had much better let me tell you about my bantams."

He looked wearily at her, and shook his head.

"I shall not be much longer with you," he said sadly. "I want you to listen, Ruth. I told you before I was taken ill that I was in debt; you had better know that I have not paid my own rent these three years; a kind friend has lent me the cash for that, and for all my other wants. I have always hoped to pay him back, but now I hardly know what to think. However, that is not what I want to talk over with you. I want to die happy, and I cannot if I leave you without a home, or even a roof to shelter you."

His persistence made the girl's heart ache; she had tried to persuade herself that his illness had affected his judgment, and that when he had once more breathed the outer air he would be as cheerful as ever; but when she looked at him and saw the dark circles under his eyes, and noted the change in his voice, she could not help being greatly troubled. She put her hand gently on his. "Father dear, I do not think it can be good for you to talk in this way; besides, even if you were much worse than you are now, I must tell you that you do not do me justice; you make me out to be helpless," she laughed so gayly that he could not help smiling. "I am quite able to make my own way in the world, indeed I am. I like employment, in fact I hate to be idle; so that it would never be a hardship to me to have to work for my own living. You see, darling father, there is no need to be anxious about me."

He again moved his head wearily. "I fancy this is the last thing I shall ask you to do for me," he said reproachfully, "and you will not let me even tell you what it is."

"I have something to tell you first," she said cheerfully; "I have a message from Mr. Clifford."

He looked surprised, but she fancied he was pleased.

"He came yesterday while you were asleep; he wants you to stay a few days at Purley with him and his sister, just for the sake of the change; and when I asked Dr. Buchan this morning he said that was just what you wanted, a change of surroundings; it will give you a fillip."

"You would go with me?" her father said.

"I was not asked, and there is a good deal to be done here. The spring cleaning had to be put off, you know; and it will be much better to get it over in your absence, now that you are so much more in the house. Besides, Mr. Clifford did not even say he should be glad to see me."

Bryant passed his hand across his eyes; he cleared his throat before he spoke again.

"You are blind, my girl; if you thought a little more about yourself you must know that the poor chap loves you so much that he would like to keep you at Purley and never let you go again."

Ruth shook her head at this, and looked incredulous. A flush rose on her father's pale face, and made him more like his old self than he had looked since his attack.

"Whether you believe it or not, you cannot alter facts," he said in a vexed tone. "Clifford loves you with all his heart and soul, and he wants you be his wife."

Ruth was as red as a rose. She felt impatient of the fixed gaze her father kept on her face. At last she said, without looking up:

"It is strange that he should not speak for himself, instead of teasing you about his feelings. He has never said a word to me."

"Ah! that is because he is such a noble fellow; he knows the sort of girl you are, and he shrinks from owing your consent to anything but your inclination."

"I don't understand," she looked bewildered; she thought of her ingratitude yesterday; if Michael Clifford really loved her she had been doubly unkind. "What do you mean by 'sort of girl,' father?"

"It's plain enough," he answered impatiently; "we are largely in his debt, and he knows that you are generous; he may fancy you would accept him just to pay off this money and enable me to die in peace."

There was a silence; the flush faded out of Ruth's cheeks, but the shame-stricken look remained there. It was terrible to her that her father should be so deeply in debt to Mr. Clifford as to make him talk in this way. It dawned upon her that he was perhaps her father's only creditor. She sat very still and quiet, thinking this over; she even put the question to herself whether, if she had been free to choose, she could have acted as her father seemed to think she would have acted—just to free him from what she felt to be a degrading burden. But Ruth was not romantic, and the idea seemed to her high-flown and repulsive. Unless she could love the man she married she was sure she could not make him happy. She longed to say they had already discussed this question, but the doctor had told her not to thwart or contradict her father.

She sat silent, her eyes fixed on her hands as they lay in her lap. Her father, who was still looking at her, saw that her forehead was puckered with perplexity; the brightness had faded from her face, and she was, he fancied, greatly troubled.

Philip Bryant was not altogether selfish, although, like many another optimist, he became impatient if others did not at once adopt his views; he could not make allowance for the struggle they might have to undergo in the process; in fact, he took it for granted that what he wished for was the only thing to be

done. In this instance it appeared to him that his daughter was purely self-willed, and was giving herself useless pain.

"If you were less prejudiced," he said, "you must see it as I do. I should not propose Michael Clifford to you if I were not sure that he would be an excellent husband."

"He might be that," she said gravely, "and yet he might not be a happy one. I am sure a man cannot be happy unless his wife loves him."

"And why should you not love him, Ruth?"

He was looking at her so inquiringly, that she flushed with a sudden fear that he suspected her secret.

"I know I could not love him as a wife ought to love her husband."

Her father was careless enough in some things, but in a case of this kind he had an almost womanly quickness of perception. The color flew to his face, and a flash of sudden intelligence brightened his heavy eyes.

"Then you have some reason for objecting," he exclaimed; "you care for some one else—I am sure of it."

She looked up quickly; his voice was full of excitement, and she felt greatly alarmed for the consequences. She took his hand in hers and tried to speak as quietly and gently as possible.

"I may not tell you now," she said, "I have promised not to speak; but soon, very soon, I hope to be able to tell you something"—she hesitated—"something that will set your mind at rest on my account."

He drew his hand away, and turned angrily from her.

"I would not have believed it from any one else—even if they'd sworn to it I'd not have believed; I had that trust in you, Ruth, that no one should have made me believe you would deceive me. There! leave me in peace. I don't want to quarrel, child. God knows you have enough against me as it is. I'll—I'll try to sleep, if you'll be good enough to leave me quiet."

Ruth felt greatly relieved; she had feared questions which she could not have answered, and then anger at her silence. She guessed that her father had exhausted himself in their prolonged discussion, and that he would probably soon fall asleep.

She silently arranged his cushions and placed his feet comfortably on the sofa; then she sat watching him.

Would he go back to the subject when he waked? She wondered. She tried bravely to remember her mother's maxim never to meet trouble half-way, and she began to plan out her father's visit to Purley, and how soon he would be able to go there. His heavy breathing soon told her that he was asleep. A timid tap at the door made her rise and open it. The little maid Faith stood outside, and began eagerly to speak. Ruth raised her hand in warning, and softly closed the door behind her.

"What is it?" she said softly; "speak low; Mr. Bryant is asleep."

"It's a gentleman, Miss, the gentleman as used to live here; and he wants to see you, Miss, and I wasn't to say nothing to nobody else but you."

CHAPTER XIII.

RUTH felt as if she were dreaming when she opened the door of the sitting-room and saw her lover standing just as she had often seen him stand beside the hearth, leaning against the high mantel-shelf. She had hardly time to look at him, however; he came quickly forward and took her in his arms, as if they two had only parted yesterday.

“My beautiful darling! my own Ruth!” he said; and he pressed her closely to him and covered her sweet face with passionate kisses.

The glow of delight she felt at finding herself once more with him and at being thus assured that he loved her dearly in spite of all her doubts and fears made her look more than ever beautiful, and for the moment concealed the traces of fatigue which yesterday had made Michael Clifford’s heart ache. Suddenly she broke into passionate crying and hid her eyes on her lover’s shoulder.

“What is it, darling?” He was half-alarmed, half-vexed; she was far more lovely than he had thought she was; he was not surprised at the love he felt for her; certainly he had not seen any one so beautiful since they parted.

“Are you not glad to see me, my Ruth?” he said in the gentle, refined voice she remembered so well.

Ruth wiped away her tears, and then she smiled up at him.

"I cried because I was so glad, so very, very glad. I have been so lonely all this while; I have wanted to ask you so many things," she said tenderly.

He slipped his hand under her chin and looked at her sweet face with increasing admiration. Formerly her frank simplicity had seemed a part of her surroundings; it now gave him a delicious sense of security in the possession of her love.

"Is that all the sweet pet wanted me for? Any old graybeard would have done for an adviser, would not he?"

She blushed, and quivered all over with the delight she felt in his mere presence. All her anxieties seemed laid to rest; it was so sweet only to look at him: to listen to him was an added delight.

He drew her to the sofa and they sat down side by side, while he kept his arm round her waist. Ruth was much less shy with him; perhaps there is some truth in the old saying—some love does strengthen in absence. But Ruth's love had been at first sought too suddenly—before it had had time to develop. Its very strength had at that time alarmed her, and she had struggled to repress it. All these months it had been growing steadily, and in the light of his dear presence and in the intense trust she felt in him, she gave herself up to her happiness and to the thankfulness she felt for his constancy.

"You see," she said shyly, for his warm kisses made her shrink in spite of herself, "since my father's illness began I have not been able to consult him about anything; and, as I told you, we shall have to leave Appledore, because—because we cannot afford to stay on here."

He was looking at her, but he was not listening with much interest.

"You said something about it in your letter, dearest; and the best way out of it is—well, my precious girl, I have come to arrange that with you."

The girl's heart seemed to lighten with the sudden relief she felt; all would be right now that she had this dear counsellor beside her. She looked up in his face with the implicit trust of a child, as she said:

"I may now tell my father we are engaged, may not I? It will make him so happy; you know how fond he was of you."

"That was very good of him." Bevington spoke absently, as if he were thinking of something else.

"Then I may tell him?" she persisted; "I am afraid he has begun to suspect already."

Bevington bent down and kissed her.

"No, dearest; you must not tell him just directly. It would hamper me, and besides it would be useless. You have waited so long that it is better to be patient just a little longer; only a little while, my Ruth. Do not look so grave! it spoils your face. I like your smiles best, my angel."

He said this rather repressively, and she feared she had vexed him.

"Please do not be angry!" she said humbly; "I will tell you why I can't wait, then you will understand. Father has asked me to marry Mr. Clifford."

"Curse the fellow's impudence!" Rising abruptly from the sofa, he began to pace the room. He was furious that this "clodhopper," as he mentally called Clifford, should dare to love Ruth. The idea had put an obstacle in his way which he had not counted

on. It had seemed to him that her father's incapable state had taken away a hindrance to his designs; and he had not believed in the existence of external interference. At last he quieted himself, and he turned to look at Ruth.

She had expected he would be angry, and she sat with a frightened look, waiting for him to speak.

He came and stood in front of her.

"You mean, I suppose, that this fellow had made you an offer, and you want me to tell you whether you should accept it?"

Ruth rose to her feet. Her cheeks and eyes glowed, and her figure seemed grander in her agitation. She did not reproach him, but her voice sounded very sad.

"Mr. Clifford has never said a word to me on the subject; and if he did, how could I even think of marrying him when I love you?"

He stood silent; he was shamed, in spite of all his worldliness, by the simple truth of her words. But the next minute he smiled at his own folly. It was clear to him; he had thought it when he read her letter, and now he felt sure of it. Ruth wanted to be relieved from debt, and to keep a comfortable home for her father. Well, he could manage both those matters for her; but he meant to take his own way of doing it; anyhow, he meant to make his darling girl happy.

He took Ruth's hand.

"Sit down again, my child; of course I was only teasing you, though it made me mad just at first that such a fellow as that should dare to look at you even. Now, look here." He had put his arm round her again, and her head nestled confidingly on his

shoulder. "I had meant to wait, but—well, darling, now I have seen you again, darling, I can't wait. That's the simple truth, sweet one. I must take you away, Ruth, as soon as you can leave your father."

"He is going away from me soon," she said thoughtfully; "please you must let me tell him before he leaves me!"

"You shall tell him in your own way, dear girl; but not till I give you leave."

She smiled at this and looked up brightly.

"I cannot marry you till I have told him;" then, looking down, she blushed at her own daring.

"I shall never give you up," he said, but she felt that he was looking away from her; "but, unfortunately, at present I am not in a position to marry you; I must wait a little. I shall never be a free man in the way I told you about; things are changed; I am dependent on my father and mother, and they would not consent to let me marry any one who had not a fortune."

Ruth looked at him very sadly; then she drew herself gently away from him.

"I understand now," she said; "you came to tell me this; you can never marry me," he heard a sob in her voice; "but, oh, why did you come again? It has made parting so much worse. Why did you say just now you would soon take me away?"

He started up from the sofa as if something had sharply stung him. He walked up and down before he answered. At last he stood again in front of her.

"Life is full of chances and changes, my girl; no one can see into the future. There are women who will bear any vexation and trouble for the sake of

being with the man they love; I thought you were one like this. And there are others who cannot even bear the weight of a secret. You understand now, by what I have told you, why I cannot let you tell your father that I love you. I have already gone through so much vexation on this subject that—that I had almost determined not to see you again; but I could not resist your summons. After all, it is not I who am to blame for this meeting, Ruth.”

He was looking gravely at her; she did not guess that he was trying her. The light seemed suddenly to fade from the future that just now had shown itself full of sunshine. Ruth hid her face in her hands; she was too wretched to cry. Her heart ached with a strange new pain that was almost intolerable. At last she looked up, and he thought her eyes swam with tenderness; and he longed to take her in his arms again, but something kept him back; he did not yet feel sure of her.

“I do not blame you,” she said; “I am grateful to you for coming. Even if I never see you again I have had this happy time with you, and I can never forget it. I shall never leave off loving you. I shall look for your name and feel proud of you, even when I know you have married some one else. It will be different with you; you must forget me; it would make your wife unhappy if you even thought of me; and you could not do such a wrong as that.” She rose and held out her hand. “Good-by, dear, dear Reggy! Ah! how happy I was when you wrote and asked me to call you so! I shall think of you and pray for you always.”

He had taken possession of her hand; his other

arm had slipped round her; she did not resist it; it was the last time, she thought.

“Don’t talk about my marrying anybody else! I shall never forget you or give you up,” he whispered passionately. “All will come right. Promise only that you will come to me when I want you! You must; I cannot live without you; you are the one love of my life. You do not care for position or outward show, do you, darling? You only care for me and for my love; and I swear you shall have both, let who will come in the way. You are mine, only mine, are you not, my Ruth?”

“Yes,” she whispered.

Another fond embrace, another request that she would keep silence about his visit as well as his love, and he left her—so agitated, so carried out of herself, that she could not think with any coherence. She did not go to the door with him; she sat half-stupefied with over-wrought feeling. At first she could only call up the memory of the dear face that had so lately been pressed close to hers, and the tender love that she had listened to. She hardly knew how their meeting had ended; he had said he would not give her up, and yet he had said that he was dependent on his parents, and must therefore marry to please them. Could he have meant—her heart grew lighter as the thought came—that he intended to distinguish himself, and so earn a livelihood for himself, and with it the right to marry whom he pleased? Ruth shrank into herself a little at the idea of marrying him without the consent of those proud parents, but she believed that they would never like to accept her as a daughter, even if the question of means had not

arisen. He evidently meant to live a quiet, retired life with her, or he would not have said that about position. Was it indeed possible that he, the light of her life, would one day be hers, her own darling husband? She started from this thought with a quick flush of shame; she had entirely forgotten her father, whom she had left sleeping; she had forgotten every one but Mr. Bevington.

Before she could reach the door Mrs. Voce came into the room. She closed the door cautiously behind her, and then she looked suspiciously at Ruth. The girl reddened under the look, but in a moment she held her head erect; she was determined to keep her promise.

"You have had a visitor, I hear, miss."

Ruth broke in gravely:

"You must say nothing about it to Mr. Bryant, Sally. Mr. Bevington did not see him. I told him about the illness; it would have greatly agitated my father to see a comparative stranger. Until he is quite himself again he must not hear of this visit; it would rouse up painful recollections. You had better tell Faith not to speak of it to any one, lest it should come round." Then she went on with an abrupt change of voice, "My father is going to stay a few days with Mr. Clifford and his sister. It is so kind of them to ask him, and we can do the spring cleaning while he is at Purley."

"Yes, miss."

The suspicious look remained on Sally Voce's face. "I'd like to know," she muttered as Ruth left the room, "what call that smart young gentleman had to come like a thief in the night after Miss Ruth. I'm going to keep my eyes open."

CHAPTER XIV.

WHEN Michael Clifford left Appledore he rode to a manor-house some miles away. He had business in the neighborhood, and he dined and slept with his friends at the manor-house. To-day, on his return to Purley, he left his horse at the stables, which were beside the town gate, at the bottom of the broad, steep street in which his house stood.

It has been said that a man's house, when his circumstances permit him to choose it, is an indication of his character; and when Michael Clifford opened his low, wide entrance door there was something reassuring and restful in the spotless space of the square hall. The doors on all sides showed that several rooms opened on to it. A round table in its centre held writing materials and a neatly arranged row of newspapers. On the right was an old-fashioned, easy-going staircase, with a mahogany hand-rail and carved balusters; the staircase looked old, but it was not cumbrous, and it contrasted happily with the white paint of the doors and skirting and the white distemper of the walls. There was something at once moderate and useful about this part of the house.

Clifford's dining-room, his library, and also his business-room were on this ground-floor; but when he entered the house he went straight to the staircase, and then along a passage which led him to a charm-

ing, spacious room with two windows at its farther end, overlooking the open country. The room was comfortably and amply furnished, but everything was simple. The sofas and chairs were perhaps extra luxurious, but the presence of the tiny lady lying stretched on one of them, wrapped in a soft, white shawl, accounted for this, as well as for the revolving book-shelves, placed close within her reach, and the reading-stand, with its long, brass arm, close by. The opening door made the invalid look round; she raised herself into a sitting position, and smiled as her brother came up to her sofa and kissed her.

Dorothy Clifford had her brother's dark complexion, but with that, all likeness between them ended. Her eyes, instead of being a blue-gray, were dark brown—so intense in color that they often looked black. Her features were delicate and somewhat attenuated, but her little nose had a slight upward tilt, and this gave an indescribable sauciness to the small, dark face. She was older than her brother was, but she was not much past thirty. She was a comparative invalid, but she had been told that with care she might possibly regain the power of walking, which for some years had almost left her, though she could move from room to room and her general health was sometimes fairly good.

“Well, Dolly,” her brother said, as he came up to her, “I know you like to be benevolent; so yesterday I took upon myself to give an invitation in your name. I hope you will endorse it.”

“That depends,” she said, smiling.

“Well, I have invited my poor paralyzed friend Bryant to come and spend a few days here; and I

have also promised that you will take care of him. What do you say to that—eh, sister?”

She looked a little less bright, but she still smiled.

“We shall be very glad to see Mr. Bryant,” she said graciously. “Was it to Mr. Bryant you said I would take care of him? Men sometimes do not like the idea of being taken care of by strangers.”

Her nose tilted a little as she uttered this last sentence.

“I did not say anything to Bryant; I spoke to his daughter.” Clifford looked away; he felt impatient under the searching gaze which his sister had fixed on his face.

“Did you ask Miss Bryant to come, too?”

There was a certain mockery in her tone, and it seemed to hurt him.

He turned away abruptly and looked out of the window.

“I should not venture to invite a lady to the house; that is your province, Dorothy,” he said over his shoulder.

“I do not know Miss Bryant,” she said dryly.

Clifford was not irritable, and his sister’s manner helped to keep his judgment calm and unprejudiced; but for all his calmness he could sometimes be very angry.

“You do not know Miss Bryant because you will not,” he said, so sternly that Dorothy felt just a little nervous. “It would have been kind of you—charitable, too—to show some friendship to a motherless girl, left alone, one may say, since her grandfather died; for her father is not the sort of a man to advise a girl of her age,”

Dorothy was looking at her delicate fingers.

“Miss Bryant has always had you to advise her, Michael. I know little about young girls and their ways.”

“Ah, well! you know what I wish, Dorothy.”

He seemed ashamed of his own sternness, for he left the window and came and sat down beside her.

“Look here!” he said, “I believe one gains nothing by beating about the bush. I am sure you wish me to be happy, Dolly. It is better to say frankly that I cannot be happy without Ruth Bryant. I want her to be my wife.”

Dorothy knew it. She had known it this long while, and yet it gave her exquisite pain to hear it said by her brother. She could have shaken him for his blind folly; he, as she thought, who might marry any one he chose, who might have the pick of the Purley girls—only there was not one good enough for him—he, to throw himself away on this farmer’s daughter, who, if all stories were true, was only another man’s leavings!

“Are you engaged to her?”

Her voice told him how vexed she was.

“I should not have asked her to be my wife without giving you some kind of warning, Dorothy. I have waited for several reasons, one being that I hoped for your sympathy. You must like Ruth Bryant if you saw her or knew something about her; but you won’t take any interest in her.”

“Perhaps I do know something about Miss Bryant; and perhaps what I have heard has not made me think well of her.”

"I did not think you, of all people, would listen to gossip," he said angrily.

"I do not think it was gossip, Michael; it came from that poor, hard-worked doctor's wife, Mrs. Buchan. She told me that Miss Bryant was very handsome, and also that she was very fond of flirting."

"That is a falsehood," he said impetuously. "I have known her ever since she was a child, and she never attempted to flirt with me."

"Very likely not, but that is no proof that she does not flirt. Don't you see, Michael? She looks on you as an old friend. You are probably not the sort of man she would venture to flirt with; she probably regards you as a brother."

Michael looked hard at his sister; he saw that she was not saying this to tease him; she was evidently in earnest, and convinced of the truth of her words.

He was very much annoyed, but he felt that she was trying to save him from disappointment, and he tried to speak patiently as he answered:

"For all that, I shall ask her to be my wife when she is less anxious about her father. Now that you know this, Dolly, will you not ask her to come and see you during her father's visit, or whenever you please?"

Men always manage these matters so clumsily. Michael did not dream of the pain he had given by his announcement, and so he deepened it by his next words.

"If I were you," Dorothy's nose had a decidedly upward tilt while she spoke, "I should be quite sure before I offered myself that there was not some one else in the way."

He turned suddenly from her, and his voice was very stern. "Take care what you are saying, Dorothy; I do not want to hear gossip repeated about any one I care for."

Dorothy was becoming very unhappy. She and her brother had sometimes had a little dispute, but he had never spoken to her in this way—as if he thought she was telling falsehoods for her own ends. She had grown very pale while she listened to him.

"I would rather be silent, Michael. I can't bear you to be angry with me, and yet I feel that you ought not to go blindfold into the affair without any warning. I thought you probably knew something about it, but I cannot think you do, after what you've said."

"What do you mean by something? It would be much better to speak out than to make such a mouthing," he said, with angry disgust.

"I mean about that pupil, that Mr. Bevington. His mother, it seems, found out that he was fond of the girl; and that was why he had to leave in such a hurry. Did you not hear why he went away so unexpectedly?"

Clifford felt suddenly cold. Bevington's sudden departure had often puzzled him, and Bryant's answer to his question on the subject had been unsatisfactory. The farmer had said that the young fellow's father had made other arrangements for him; and Clifford had concluded that Mr. Bevington was not satisfied with the teaching he got at Appledore, which was certainly an old-fashioned farm, with few modern appliances belonging to it.

"That is a mere folly," he said, though his face

flushed with burning jealousy; "Mr. Bryant kept his daughter away for some time, and then the hours, and—and so forth, were so arranged that there was little chance that she would see much of the pupil."

Dorothy Clifford smiled and shrugged her delicate shoulders.

"I hear she has been seen walking in the garden with him; and after he went away she met him alone in the Mill Valley."

"That settles me." He rose up from his chair in stern indignation. "The whole story is a fabrication. So good, so beautiful a creature is sure to have enemies; and what will not one woman say of another when she is jealous of her? Ruth Bryant would never meet any man alone away from her home, unless he were her promised husband. Besides, if there had been anything between her and that young fellow, do you suppose he could have kept away all these months from Appledore?"

He turned to leave the room, full of that which he considered to be righteous indignation.

"I must tell you something more, Michael," his sister said; she had been pained and startled by his anger, but it must be simply her duty to warn him about Ruth Bryant. Dorothy considered, judging from what she had been told, that the girl had behaved indiscreetly, to say the least of it. She feared that she had compromised herself with the pupil, and that now she wished to patch up her reputation and also pay her father's debts by marrying Dorothy's brother.

The small, fragile woman looked very determined as she said, "Mr. Bevington rode past the house this

morning, going toward Church-Marshfield. You did not go to Appledore this morning or you must have met him on your way home."

Her brother stood staring at her; this news had quieted him.

"How could you see him?" he said; "you cannot see who passes."

"I stayed downstairs this morning to finish the half-year's accounts," she answered quietly. "I scarcely know why I looked out of the window, but I did; and I distinctly saw Mr. Bevington pass."

Michael left the room; he was very angry. He knew that he had been harsh with his sister, but he could not bring himself to say so. He was disappointed in Dorothy; he had considered her large-minded, compared with others of her sex, though she had always vexed him by her indifference about making acquaintance with Ruth Bryant. That had been caused, he used to think, by Dorothy's exaggerated opinion of him and of what he had a right to expect in a wife. He had often smiled at the thought of his sister's surprise when she should be presented to Ruth. This slander she had passed on to him was something quite different. If he knew the originator of it, he felt that he should like to punish that person. As to Dorothy, he should go out and stay out till dinner-time; and then he should try to meet her as if nothing had happened.

Michael Clifford had always more to do than he knew how to accomplish, so that he could easily find engagements for this afternoon; but he did not seek for them; he was bent on walking out along the Appledore road.

This led down the steep street to the dark, low-browed archway that was still called Broadgate, the last remaining defence of the once strongly fortified town of Purley. He smiled when he had passed through the gateway and found himself on the quickly descending road outside. If he disbelieved this scandal, he asked himself why he was walking in such a hurried way toward Appledore. The road led straight to the bridge across the river, and Clifford forced himself to linger while he watched the lovely light on the water. The river foamed itself into a froth of snowy whiteness over the weir below the fulling-mill. On the other side the lofty bank, which seemed piled up with huge irregular blocks of limestone, was half-hidden by a tall overgrowth of trees.

Michael stood watching the golden patches of light on the water where they found their way in gaps between the trees. He was telling himself that he had been absurdly reticent toward Ruth. She might suppose from his guarded manner that he was indifferent about her good opinion, that he did not care for her in any way. Would it not be wiser, more manly, to own his love to her, and tell her he would wait patiently till she could love him in return? He sauntered on, debating this question while he climbed the steep ascent beyond the bridge. Before he reached the top a horseman came in sight on the brow of the hill, horse and rider magnified in size against the clear blue sky behind.

In another moment the horse and his rider passed Clifford, and he recognized Reginald Bevington. The young fellow's hat was pulled over his eyes; he did not seem to see Clifford.

Michael turned and stood looking after him.

"After all," he said gravely, "why should I be like a woman, and fancy what does not exist? He has most likely heard of Mr. Bryant's seizure, and naturally he has gone over to inquire for him. He may be staying in the neighborhood. If there had been anything between him and Ruth he would have gone to Appledore before now."

CHAPTER XV.

PHILIP BRYANT had been a week at Purley, and Ruth, meanwhile, was so busy superintending the house-cleaning at Appledore that, except in the evenings, she had not had time to feel dull without him. This morning she had received two letters. One of them only contained a few lines from Mr. Clifford, giving an excellent report of her father's progress, and asking her to spare him to them a few days longer.

Ruth sat down at once and answered this request by writing to her father; and then she went out into the garden and walked up and down on the wet, creaking gravel below her bedroom window while she read her other letter.

It was from Mr. Bevington. The girl had become so aware of Sally Voce's constant watchfulness that she kept on this side of the house, out of sight, while she read. Her cheeks glowed at her lover's passionate words. The young fellow wrote that he could not live any longer without her; he had fancied he could wait, but he found that was impossible. His darling must come to him without delay. Surely, he went on, she cared enough for him to risk something for his sake; and then he gave the details of his plan. He asked Ruth to meet him three days from the date of his letter at the old stone on the moor, about three miles from Appledore, a little way beyond the out-of-the-way village called All Marsh-

field. The letter was tender as well as passionate. Her lover said that she would not only make him happier than he had ever been in his life, but that she would also make a better man of him. Her sweet, unselfish companionship would be both a help and an example.

Ruth kissed the loving words, but she felt sorely troubled; it was so hard to refuse her lover's passionate request, and yet she could not leave Appledore in her father's absence and without his knowledge; for Mr. Bevington said that she must not speak of his proposal to any one. She walked up and down, trying to judge for the best; this was the first time she had been called on to decide an urgent question on her own responsibility, and she found it for some time impossible to come to a decision. Mr. Bevington was of course his own master; he probably was accustomed to act without consulting his parents, but she felt that her case was very different; she could not desert her father when he was ill and in such trouble; she could not go away to be married without consulting him beforehand.

She had grown tired of walking up and down before she arrived at a resolution. Sally Voce sent Faith to call her in to dinner, but Ruth did not heed the summons. At last she roused herself from this puzzled revery and went in-doors. Mr. Bevington had told her that he was going to London, and that she must write to him at his club; she decided to post her letter at All Marshfield so as to avoid notice.

She wrote to him a sweet, tender little letter, thanking him for all his love; but she asked him to wait till she had told his plan to her father. Then,

if he consented, she would meet her lover as he wished. She added that she must ask Reggy to give her father a home; he was too infirm at present to be left alone. She blushed deeply while she wrote; she was so shy in the midst of her tender joy.

"Father will consent; I know he will," she told herself, while her eyes grew liquid with love. "It is not that he is so set on Mr. Clifford; he only wants to be sure that I shall have a home of my own. He must prefer that I should be happy with the man I love."

She walked rapidly with her letter to the little sequestered village. It seemed to her that something would happen to prevent the posting it; and then, when she dropped it into the little box fixed on the wall of the lonely parsonage, her heart grew light again, though it throbbed with hope and with expectation. All at once she stood still on the muddy road, for a new perplexity had come to trouble her: her lover might refuse to wait till she had consulted her father; he might answer her letter in person, and insist on taking her away with him. What should she do if this happened?

She repeated this question as she walked along the high-road. On one side the everlasting hills looked down on her from their green summits; on the other a large width of cultivated land intervened before the loftier and grayer giants of the region broke into the horizon and shortened daylight in the valley.

Ruth was twenty-one, but she was still a child in her experience of life. She had no precedents to guide her; she had not even enjoyed the borrowed experiences of a school-taught girl. She had lived

lapped in the restful obscurity of her own village, like a butterfly in the chrysalis state of its existence, with only an occasional sense of wings that might unfold themselves when they found opportunity.

"If I only knew," she said, with a passionate earnestness, "what was best for me to do!" She soon brought herself to be sure that this "best" must be with Mr. Bevington. He loved her so dearly, she was sure he would be willing to have her father to live with them. She tried to put herself and her own joy in her marriage out of the question. She wanted a good home for her father, a home in which she might be with him. She had found out in this week of separation how anxiously her thoughts clung to him; she was always wondering how he could manage at Purley without her or Sally. Mr. Clifford had assured her that he would be well cared for, so she could only trust that all was well. She asked herself why she should hesitate to marry her beloved Reggy, if she could provide this desired home for her father. She could neither answer this question nor bring herself to alter the decision which her letter would convey to her lover.

Mrs. Voce was at the gate waiting for her; her small eyes, now twinkling with expectation, were impinged on by her plump, pink cheeks; a general plumpness, be it remarked, had certainly increased in Sally during her stay at Appledore. Her lips were slightly parted with an inquisitive expression, as she watched for her young mistress' approach; and Ruth, as she drew near, could not help seeing that the old woman's expression was furtive.

"There be a letter for you, Miss Bryant," she said.

"I set it on the writing-table in the parlor. The rector have drove into Purley for second post, an' he have got it, he says, along o' his."

She stood aside to let Ruth pass on to the house; the girl could not help smiling at the increase of respect which had come with Sally's apparent suspicions.

She looked very happy when she saw that her letter was from Mrs. Whishaw. In it her aunt asked Ruth to come and spend the rest of her father's absence with her and her cousin.

"It would be very nice to go," Ruth thought; but she saw that she could not leave Appledore during these coming days. Mr. Bevington would certainly write, if he did not come over. She could not go away, though she longed to be with her aunt and with Peggy. She thought that without betraying her secret she might sound her aunt on this subject of a secret marriage. Ruth did not like his plan, but then a great change had come into her life since she had refused Mr. Bevington's proposal in the Mill Valley.

She read the letter again; her own longing to get away, to be safe with her aunt, puzzled her.

"I must be getting weak-headed," she said, smiling. She felt that something was still in the envelope, and she took it out mechanically with her free hand while she reread the letter. It was so affectionately worded, Ruth's heart swelled as she thought of the treasure her cousin Peggy possessed in a mother like this. The next minute she rebuked herself as ungrateful. Peggy had lost her father so early that she could not even remember him. A postscript on the fourth page of the letter had escaped

her notice on first reading her aunt's letter; it was only these words:

"I enclose a newspaper cutting from yesterday's paper; a friend of Peggy's gave it her. We want to know if it is about your father's Mr. Bevington."

The letter fluttered out of Ruth's hand as she hurried to examine the enclosure. While she read it she grew pale; her eyelids drooped; she seemed to shrink together, to lose some of her height, as she stood beside the writing-table. This was what she read:

"We learn that a marriage has been arranged to take place in late autumn between Mr. Reginald Louis Alfred Bevington, only son of Ralph Boynton Bevington, Esq., of Bevington Manor, near Vixensgrove, and Miss Clara Stretton, only daughter of Marmaduke Sydney Stretton, Esq., of Castle Stretton, in the same county."

Ruth felt unable to move; her heart seemed suddenly stilled from its fluttering.

At last she put the paper down on the table and passed her hand slowly across her forehead; she wondered if she had been dreaming. The answer came with a shiver that ran through her from her head to her feet. No, she was awake; she had been standing while she read her aunt's letter and this bit of printed paper. Instinctively she put out her hand for the cutting and crumpled it into her pocket.

What did it mean? Was it a mere bit of gossip? She had heard that newspapers put in news which was sometimes contradicted later on. She still felt leaden, as if her feet were soldered to the floor. After a time which seemed to her so long and painful that

she could hardly bear it, but which she dared not disturb even by a movement, lest she should tangle the clew which was gradually unravelling itself from her bewilderment, a sudden remembrance came to her of a story she had heard at her aunt's. She had gone by Mrs. Whishaw's request to see a sick man, a carpenter who worked occasionally at the house. The man had turned sullenly away from her, but his wife, in a burst of grief, had told Ruth that his illness was more mental than bodily: their only daughter had been, the woman said, "'ticed away by some one who had promised to marry her and had deceived her." The girl had written this to her mother a month after she left home, and had said she meant to put an end to herself, as she could not bear the disgrace that had come to her. Since then no news had come from her, and the parents had given up all hope of seeing her again.

A mist swam before Ruth's eyes; she put out her hand and pressed it firmly on the table; it seemed to her that she was falling. Then she struggled to free herself from the horrible doubt that had seized her; she asked herself how she dared suspect her lover because of a mere newspaper report.

She could not, however, shake herself free from the torment it had caused her. At first she thought of writing to him and telling him what she had heard; but this idea was soon rejected. She could not have borne that he should doubt her; how, then, could she insult him by such an implied doubt of his honor? Mrs. Bevington must be very proud of her son, and would naturally have ambitious views for him; it was possible that she might wish for this

marriage with Miss Stretton, and might have spoken about it among her friends; and then, somehow, the story, as often happened with stories, had taken shape in this newspaper announcement.

Presently Ruth raised her head; her perplexity had cleared; she resolved to trust, to try to be patient. Reggy would certainly see or hear of this paragraph, and he would himself come over and explain it. She was inclined to smile at her own changeableness; she had dreaded his coming; she knew it would be so hard to resist his pleading; and now she was longing to see him. It seemed to her she owed him great atonement for the doubt of his truth she had indulged just now.

CHAPTER XVI.

MRS. BEVINGTON understood her son, and she trusted to his weakness—a weakness which had often helped her to carry out her wishes regarding him. She doated on this dearly loved only child; but she knew that, although he was obstinate in adhering to any plan he had formed, he was also exceedingly impressionable; and that it would greatly help her plans, even if it did not make this marriage with Miss Stretton a certainty, if Reginald could be brought thoroughly to realize the command of money he must possess as her husband. It had not been difficult to do this, and Clara's insignificance, added to her extreme gentleness, had helped to deepen the young fellow's impression that she would make a desirable wife. She was not a beauty, but she was pleasant-looking, and he could not help being sure that she liked him.

It must be said that, in her way, Clara Stretton was very fond of her old playfellow. She was one of those women who will make dutiful and affectionate wives if they are kindly treated, without feeling the need of any special affinity between them and their husbands.

There was little depth of feeling in Mrs. Bevington, but her perception was very keen. She had early sounded the depth of Clara's nature, and she had determined that the girl should not be allowed to for-

get Reginald. Clara was likely, if left to herself, to accept the first man who presented himself as a prospective husband; and Mrs. Bevington had therefore taken good care that Clara should not be allowed to make such a mistake.

This year Mr. Stretton had suffered so constantly from gout that, to his wife's dismay, he had elected to spend the spring at Castle Stretton; and Mrs. Bevington had therefore made the sacrifice of remaining at the manor-house during May and June, except for one fortnight lately, when she persuaded Clara's parents to allow the girl to accompany her to London. Reginald went with his mother, and before they returned to the country he found that he had engaged himself to Clara Stretton. The day after this had taken place, the excitement over, he remembered Ruth and he felt thoroughly disgusted with himself and with the world. He went back to the country, but before he saw Clara again, in his despair he wrote that letter to Ruth. He determined not to give her up, whatever happened. He did not attempt to plan his future; he was willing to let himself drift. He told himself that if Ruth listened to his proposal, and came willingly to the meeting-place he had appointed, she would have chosen her own lot; he could not be held answerable for what might happen. He meant to provide handsomely for Ruth and for her father. After all, she would be his real wife, in all but name; and she was the only woman he had truly loved. There was, of course, the chance that Ruth might prove restive, and refuse to belong to him on those conditions; he did not see his way clearly in this last case.

"There is no use in forecasting," he thought; "if the worst comes to the worst, I must marry Ruth privately and get out of the Stretton business by degrees."

He was determined not to give up the love that he knew was his. Some day he should be his own master, and then he could do as he pleased.

In London he fell in with several of his men friends; a long talk with one of them, Colonel Scudamore, on the afternoon of his arrival, made him extremely doubtful about the wisdom of such a marriage as he contemplated. While he talked to his fashionable, polished friend, a man so deeply versed in the wisdom of this world that he at once divined the perplexity in which the young fellow stood, Reginald seemed to realize little by little how young and ignorant he was; he saw that his scruples were those of a mere boy. His mother had often told him that he was "made for society;" if he were to condemn himself to a private marriage with Ruth his prospects would be ruined; he could not visit any one. And yet she was so very beautiful that she would attract a very undesirable amount of notice. Setting aside his mother's opposition, he thought he could soon overcome his father's. He did not see how he could produce Ruth in society as his wife till several years of cultivation had passed over her. She was unquestionably a lady. She would not have pleased his fastidious taste, he argued, if she had been less refined in feeling; but he fancied she wanted rather more than this. She wanted conventional ideas about dress and the little things that fit a woman for society. She was almost provokingly simple, and she might be slow in taking up new ideas.

He told himself all this, and then he thought of Ruth as he had last seen her, with the increased charm which love had given to her beauty; his objections fled, and he resolved to go down next morning to Appledore.

There was a station at Church-Marshfield, much nearer to the farm than Purley Junction was; but so few trains stopped at it that most people preferred to go to Purley. Mr. Bevington, however, had his own reasons for wishing to escape observation in this visit to Appledore.

Ruth had felt strangely depressed this morning; perhaps the heavy gray sky helped the feeling. She went up the lane and stood watching. She could not help expecting her lover, and yet her heavy heart warned her that he probably would not come. She stood at the end of the lane looking toward Purley, so that Bevington saw her before she recognized him. She had, indeed, turned back toward the farm-house, but about half-way she stopped to listen. Footsteps were coming quickly down the lane, and she knew that they were her lover's; a kind of panic seized her; her heart began to flutter and she slackened her pace. She did not look round till he came up with her at the bottom of the lane.

He looked anxiously into her eyes as he took her hand in his.

"Are you not glad to see me, darling?" he said, in a reproachful tone. "I must say turning your back on him is not a warm welcome to give a fellow. What is the meaning of it—eh, you naughty pet?"

Either the seductive charm of his voice or the love

in his eyes—who can accurately define the means by which love governs?—conquered Ruth's new reticence, and she gave him a winning smile.

He opened the gate for her, and she passed silently into the garden, and then into the house. She felt just a little shy when he closed the door of the sitting-room and came toward her.

"You received my letter?" she asked.

He was struck by her formal way of speaking; yet she had not spoken in this way consciously; there was a question in his eyes as he looked at her, and he hesitated to take her in his arms. She had been so different last time, he remembered.

"Yes," he said, "I had your letter; but, dear child, I cannot agree to your terms. I told you I wanted you to come to me at once. Your father, if he likes, can join you later; but I must have you all to myself at first."

"I could not go to you without telling father beforehand."

He went up to her, put his arms round her waist, and tenderly kissed her.

"It is not a question to settle standing face to face, as if we were going to quarrel;" he drew her to the sofa and made her sit down beside him; then, as he kissed her yet more fondly, he said, "I don't seem to know my pet when she looks strong-minded; I am afraid of her."

Ruth already felt ashamed of herself, and she flushed deeply while he spoke. She nestled her head on his shoulder, and they sat for some time in that delicious silence which, to some lovers, is far more

sympathetic than words can ever be—a silence full of deep, mysterious meaning, in which hearts become more and more closely united.

At last he said, as if he were answering her:

“Yes, it is so entirely our own business that there can be no sense in taking another opinion about it. You will not mind living in London, will you, dear girl?”

“I should like it,” she answered simply, “but when I am with you, dear, one place will be much the same as another.”

The tender thrill in her voice pained him; he turned suddenly away from her and walked to the window. Her manner puzzled him more than ever, and he had laid his plans on the certainty that Ruth was, after all, just like any other girl.

Now, as he looked at her and became more and more dominated by her actual presence, he felt that no sacrifice could be too great to make for the possession of such a glorious and loving creature.

He stood at the window, trying to free himself from the strange power which she exercised over him; while Ruth sat wondering whether she should tell him of the newspaper report. There was no truth in it; she was sure of that, for he had kissed her even more fondly than usual. She felt sure, quite sure, he loved her; but then, if he knew about this report, he might contradict it. He was not obliged to own his love for her, as he had done; and this proved that he had not altered. It would be better, she thought, to tell him about it; and yet, brave as she was, Ruth could not get out her words. There seemed to her to be something so affronting to her

lover in confessing her knowledge of that which was not true, and which had no doubt sorely vexed him.

He turned abruptly from the window.

"When do you expect Mr. Bryant home?" he said.

"In less than a week, I think; I will write and tell you as soon as I know exactly."

There was another pause, and then he came and again sat down beside her.

"My Ruth, you must not wait till then; there would be fresh delay while you were trying to persuade him to consent, for he is sure to object at first; fathers always do. You will not be cruel enough to keep me waiting for you so long, my precious girl; you will come to me to-morrow."

He kissed her so passionately that she could not at first answer him. She was glad of this delay, for it was terribly painful to have to repeat her refusal. She loved him very dearly; she would make any sacrifice for him, but she would not do that which was wrong and also cruel; for she knew it would break her father's heart if he came home and found that she had deserted him. It has been already said that Ruth was not romantic. In spite of her almost quixotic unselfishness, she shrank with a sort of horror from anything that could not bear the light of day. The secret had been a far sorer trial to her honest nature than her lover guessed at, but to leave home in secret would be, she thought, thoroughly disreputable; and no future happiness could ever wipe such a shadow from her name. Even for her lover's sake she could not consent.

She looked sadly at him.

"You are blinded now," she said, "but if I were

to do what you ask you would afterward be sorry; you would not respect me, because I should have done something I knew to be wrong."

Once more he was strangely puzzled as he looked at her. He wondered how she had understood his letter. It seemed to him she was not thinking of marriage with him, and yet he hesitated; he did not know what next to say. One little false step might destroy all the progress he hoped he had made.

She glanced quickly at him, for his continued silence surprised her. She feared her refusal had made him unhappy; yes, he was looking very sad. She smiled up at him.

"Even if I were to do as you wish," she said shyly, "I hardly think any nice clergyman would marry us without asking questions; and we could not say, either of us, that our parents had consented to our marriage."

He frowned at this and bit his lip, he was so utterly disappointed.

"I hate parsons, and I never have anything to do with them that can be done without them. We can be joined together just as well at a registry office as by a parson. There, little one! are you contented?" He was kissing her again, in a passionate way that alarmed her; he had never been like this before, and it made her timid of contradicting him, lest she should make him angry. Poor dear fellow! There was every excuse, she told herself; he loved her so much that he wished to marry her as soon as possible. But for all that, Ruth did not believe in a marriage unless it was celebrated in church; she said this to him.

He held her a little away from him and shook his head.

"I could not have believed that you were such a dreadful little Philistine," he said petulantly. "What possible difference can it make how we are joined together? If you are pining after a wedding with favors and orange blossoms, and that sort of bosh, I can only say you have mistaken your man. I could not submit to such a performance. Besides, as our marriage is to be kept perfectly private, the other way is the only safe one. Parsons will gossip like washerwomen, if you give them the ghost of a chance." He bent down and kissed her blushing cheek. "There! there! Never mind what I said! I got cross over the parson. Listen, darling! this is what I want you to do: meet me at the place I named as early as you can to-morrow. We will go to London from one of the small stations, and I promise to bring you safe home again before your father sets foot in Appledore. You shall tell him what we have done as soon as I give you leave. Just now I have a special reason for asking you to be silent."

He looked away as he ended.

Ruth's heart gave a great jump, and then the power which had kept her silent seemed all at once to leave her free to speak. She heard the clang of the house-place door, and she knew that Sally Voce had come back from her visit to Little Marshfield. How long he must have been with her! She must send him away. Instead of answering his proposal she said quietly, without a shade of doubt in her tone, "Did you see that notice in the paper that you were going to marry Miss Stretton?"

"Confound the fools! Who has told you such cursed folly?" He had reddened to his hair, and as she looked at him he tried to avoid her eyes.

Ruth sat still and stiff; then she drew herself away from him and rose from the sofa. She had no sense of any feeling except that of stinging shame.

After a little she said slowly, "I had not believed it; I did not mean to speak of it; I thought it was idle gossip. Reggy," she said, bursting from the stupor that had seized her, and clasping her hands in a passionate appeal that distracted him, "tell me yourself! say it is a falsehood, and I will believe you!"

He stood silent; her passion had quieted his anger; he thought it showed the strength of her love; he believed that this revelation might after all help him; her feelings would be stronger than her prudence. He looked at her without a trace of compunction as if he accepted the situation.

"It is true," he said. "I had not quite made up my mind to marry this lady. Even if I had, she could never be to me what you are. You will be my real wife, my sweetest Ruth, let me marry whom I will."

Her lips parted with the sudden horror she felt; but the rest of her face was set like stone. She held up her hand in warning, for she heard approaching footsteps.

"I will say good-by to you, Mr. Bevington," she said very slowly, and in a cold, expressionless voice. "I must ask you not to repeat your visit; I do not wish to see any visitor during my father's absence."

CHAPTER XVII.

THE weather suddenly changed; the gray lowering sky had as suddenly lifted. A far-off blue, powdered here and there with filmy white vapor that seemed to promise heat, had taken the place of those heavy, brooding clouds. As Ruth stood at the gate waiting for her father, she had to shade her eyes with her hand from the glare of the sunshine; it was so brilliant.

Ruth felt very strange. She had not come to herself since she parted from Mr. Bevington; and just as the body faints when some sudden shock arrests the course of the blood and jars the nerves, so in like manner the mind, when over-tried, will sometimes wander from the guidance to which it has been accustomed to submit itself and its powers. Ruth was at war with herself and with every one. Faith and hope were alike wrecked, and love seemed to her a mere mocking mask, hiding base intentions. Feeling was dead in her, except the one feeling of dread—a dread of herself and of what she might be tempted to do; and with this dread was an almost fierce longing for protection.

Ruth's life had been so quiet and retired that she had lived in ignorance, as so many of her sisters do, of the strength of her own feelings; till this sudden

wrench had aroused them into active struggle she hardly knew she had them.

For the time she had become callous. She sent off a messenger to her father, asking him to come back to her and telling him she could not any longer do without him. She now stood watching the carriage that was bringing him home as it drove slowly down the lane. She had not made any plan as to what she should say to her father. Her mind was still too much disordered for coherent thought. She could act, but she did not even try to think; and it may be that unconsciously she longed for her father's presence as much for the abstraction from self, which the very sight of him must bring, as from a real belief in his power to protect her.

Philip Bryant looked fondly at his daughter as he was helped out of the carriage and then into the sitting-room. He was evidently stronger, and Mrs. Voce asserted as she helped him that "he did not lean so heavy by one-half as he did afore he left."

Bryant smiled, but he did not talk to Sally; he seemed anxious to find himself alone with his daughter.

"Well, my lass," he said when Sally at last departed, "you've had a dull time, I'm thinking. It would put new life in you, child, if you could have such a visit as I've had. Miss Clifford has been as kind and as pleasant as if I were an old friend, taking such care of me as would make you smile; it did me sometimes. As to Michael—well, there! I'd best not speak about him, lest I should make a baby of myself."

"I am so glad, dear!"—she bent over him and

kissed him; she felt such comfort in his presence—"so very glad!" she murmured, as she placed herself beside him.

"Yes, I wish you could have been there too. I had no notion that Michael was so looked up to and respected. Why, only yesterday there was my Lord Boscobel rode in to see him, a matter of ten miles or so; and I saw that he shook hands both with Michael and with Miss Clifford as if he thought much of them. And not only that, there's the archdeacon and all the people about take notice of them. It's a wonder and a pleasure, too, to see how he's looked up to."

"I am very glad," Ruth said. Her father's news seemed to justify the strong trust she had always had in Michael Clifford. "His sister must be very proud of him," she added.

Philip Bryant sighed and looked wistfully at his daughter.

"Yes, poor soul!" He sighed again. "I am sorry for Miss Clifford. Not for her invalid state; she makes a joke of that; she has such lively spirits. We had many a hearty laugh together, I can tell you. She has a rare way of seeing through her neighbors, though no one would suspect it of her."

"Why do you say you are sorry for her?" Ruth asked.

"Well, my girl, you have something to do with that, I fancy. Miss Clifford loves her brother dearly. There's another brother in Scotland, it seems; but he's nothing to her, she says, compared with this one; and yet the poor soul told me she could not make Michael happy."

Ruth listened with a heart-sick consciousness of the meaning of his words. It seemed to her that Fate stood behind her, driving her on with an iron rod to an inevitable future.

Miss Clifford seems to have got very confidential with you. Why can she not make her brother happy?"

"Well, no; she was not very friendly at first. She was very polite, but stiff, I fancied; and I felt shy. I thought she was perhaps angry that her brother had done so much for me; and then, whether Michael saw it and spoke to her, or what happened, I cannot say; but she altered all at once, and we had long talks together."

He paused and seemed to hesitate, but Ruth sat silent. It seemed to her that she knew what his next words would be, and that she had better hear them. Her father looked away from her when he spoke again.

"Miss Clifford told me that her brother cannot be happy without you, Ruth. She said she had hoped he would get over his love, and she gave that as a reason why she has avoided making your acquaintance; but she has now come to a decision. If you will listen to Michael she will go to Scotland and live with her brother David, who has lost his wife, it appears, and has two motherless girls."

There was a pause; then she said:

"And what did you say, father?"

Her voice sounded so weary that he turned to look at her; she was very pale, and there was a restless expression in her eyes which struck him as unusual.

"I repeated what you told me, child, the last time

we spoke on this subject. I said you did not wish to marry; but I could not help saying, too, on my own account—you see, she has been so good to me, Ruth—that I love Michael dearly, and that I hope and trust you and he may one day come together. I said to her, ‘I have not long to live, and it would greatly help me when my time comes to know that my girl is safe with such a man as Michael Clifford.’”

“Did you say that to Mr. Clifford as well as to his sister?”

He thought she spoke defiantly, and his voice was sad as he answered, “No, my girl, I had not forgotten a hint you gave me about some one else.” He gave her a yearning, wistful look, as if to entreat her to spare him this disappointment of his hopes. “Eh, Ruth?” he said tenderly.

The girl rose abruptly and walked up and down the room; her face was wrung with pain. At last, with bent head and flushed cheeks, she stood still in front of her father.

“Would you be really happy, dear, if I were to say I will marry Mr. Clifford?”

His eyes glistened as he looked at her; there were tears in them as he answered:

“More happy than words can tell, my darling; because I should feel your own happiness was safe. I should not have a sorrow or a care. But I fancied there was some one in the way.”

She moved her head restlessly, as if his answer was beside the question; and then she said slowly and without raising her eyes:

“You are mistaken; but look here, father! I cannot force myself. I have no love to give Mr. Clifford;

and you must tell him so. If he likes to take me for his wife on those terms I will marry him. But understand, father"—she spoke so harshly that he stared at her in some alarm, and the intense gaze he met was not reassuring—"understand," she repeated, "you and Mr. Clifford must arrange it between you; I can't have any love scene, or nonsense of that kind."

Philip Bryant's sudden joy was crushed, and yet he did not venture to remonstrate, lest she should withdraw this very unexpected consent to his wishes.

"Time will alter her," he thought; "I will do the best I can," he said. "Won't you kiss me, darling, and let me thank you for your goodness?"

She bent down and let him kiss her; but she was glad to make an excuse to leave him.

"You are tired," she said, "and you need rest. I will not let you talk any more till you have had a nap."

She arranged his cushions and told Sally not to disturb him, and then went into the garden and began to tie the crocus grass together with a sort of feverish haste, as if her days were numbered. She soon gave up her employment, however; her head ached and her mouth was parched. She wanted a refuge from thought, and this monotonous use of her fingers encouraged its presence. She went resolutely back to the house. It seemed to her that a list ought to be made of the furniture and of her father's possessions before he left Appledore. She could not bring her mind in its confused state to grasp anything clearly, but she clung to any occupation that presented itself, as a shelter from the consideration of

the promise she had made. She did not hope to free herself from this marriage; nothing mattered now, she thought; all that had made life dear had suddenly died. Ruth felt as if her youth had died with the loss of her faith in her lover; it could not matter now what became of her.

CHAPTER XVIII.

It was a relief to Ruth when Mrs. Voce told her that she had sent for her daughter-in-law and for little George to occupy her empty cottage and keep it aired in her absence.

Lucy would "take it very kind," she said, if Miss Bryant would go and see her.

Ruth felt sure that Michael Clifford would come over to inquire for her father, and she determined that she would not be at home.

Her father was sitting in the porch smoking when she went out.

"I am going to see poor Lucy Voce," she said, as she passed him.

Bryant looked uneasy.

"If Michael Clifford comes over, what am I to say to him?" He hesitated as he spoke. "It would be much better for you to meet. I could let him know that you will listen to him."

"I will keep my promise, father; you need not fear that I shall go back from it; but I ask you to spare me any kind of a scene with Mr. Clifford."

"Suppose he says he must see you?" Bryant's voice sounded fretful.

Ruth looked at him frankly and tried to smile.

"You see, father," she said, "I am not quite what you think me; I am not a saint, only a very imperfect woman, and I must have my own way on some

points. If you insist on my seeing Michael Clifford I shall probably affront him by my coldness. If he writes to me I will answer his letter; that seems the easiest way; only it must be clearly understood that I do not love him, and that he is not at present to expect me to do so."

Philip Bryant sighed at the hard task that lay before him. He thought, as he watched the girl's firm, graceful walk up the lane, how much pleasanter and easier this matter would be if she would look at it from his point of view. She evidently did not care for any one else, as he had feared she did, or she could not so quickly have promised to marry Clifford. It would be in every way so much better if she would stay at home this afternoon and let things take their natural course, and give the poor chap a chance of winning her. The afternoon grew warmer, and Sally Voce came out and suggested that Mr. Bryant should go in-doors. He was still unable to use his foot, but he could move easily now with the help of a crutch and Sally's strong arm; and she had placed him comfortably in his easy-chair some time before Mr. Clifford's arrival.

Sally had been on the lookout for him. Both father and daughter had been very silent, and the shrewd old woman had felt that something unusual had been discussed between them. At first she fancied that this related to Mr. Bevington's visits, but when she overheard Ruth's parting words as she left her father, Sally's long-cherished hope about Mr. Clifford took fresh life. She became excited as she saw him tying up his horse at the gate, and welcomed him with a beaming smile as she threw the door

open to its widest extent and ushered him into the sitting-room.

It would be difficult to say which of the men felt the more nervous as they shook hands. Philip Bryant's keen perception taught him that Clifford would be unwilling to accept a wife on the terms which Ruth had proposed, and yet he dared not say more than she had authorized him to say. He began by asking after Miss Clifford.

Michael smiled as he answered; this question had smoothed the way for what he wanted to say.

"Dorothy is all right, thank you. I am to give you a message from her. You were kind enough to say you should be glad to see her at Appledore, and I was to tell you that she will much enjoy coming over, whenever Miss Bryant likes to see her."

Bryant felt uncomfortable. In the intense interest and relief of the other subject he had forgotten to speak of a meeting between Ruth and Miss Clifford; but he soon recovered himself. If Ruth was willing to marry the brother, she had, of course, no objection to make acquaintance with the sister.

"I will get Ruth to write," he said, and then he paused, wondering how he should frame his proposal.

"Is Miss Bryant at home?" Clifford asked.

"Well, no; she has gone to Little Marshfield. Rather a hot walk to-day!"

"There is a storm in the air," Clifford said. "I fancy we are going to have quite a lot of rain."

Another pause, in which Bryant's perplexity so greatly increased that he felt tongue-tied. At last he said:

"It appears that your sister is willing that—that—I mean in regard to your wishes about Ruth."

"She told you so, did she?" His eyes sparkled with joyful surprise, and Bryant at once understood that her brother was not entirely in Dorothy's confidence. He cleared his throat with a feeling of relief.

"Yes, Miss Clifford was very frank. I fancy she could not bear to give you up, but she said she wanted you to be happy your own way, and she hoped you would marry Ruth, because she knew you wished it."

"My wish is only half the battle," said Clifford slowly.

"My good fellow, do you expect a woman to fall into your mouth before you have even told her you care about her—much less asked her to have you?"

Love is blind, but it is also very sensitive; and something in the farmer's tone stirred Michael.

"What do you mean?" he said abruptly; but Bryant saw how his eyes sparkled. "Can you give me a hope that your daughter will listen to me? Are you sure that she does not care for some one else?"

"I am sure of that, my boy; I have found that out for you. Last time I spoke to you I was still in doubt myself; now I am clear about it. If you ask her to be your wife, I am pretty sure she will have you."

Clifford passed his hands over his eyes; he felt dazzled by this sudden prospect of happiness. He felt, too, that he must know his fate at once.

"I should probably meet her if I walked on to Little Marshfield?" he said eagerly.

"I am not sure; she might go round by Watling

Street; she visits a poor woman who lives in the muddy lane they call by that grand name. If she does come that way, ten to one you would miss her. I say, old chap! why do you try to see her? Why don't you write? If you take my advice you'll write. Ruth is so uncommon shy, you know."

Michael Clifford sat thinking.

"I could certainly write," he said, after a pause, "though I should prefer to speak. If I come to-morrow, I might find her at home. No, by the by, I cannot come to-morrow."

Bryant put his hand on his friend's shoulder, looking very much in earnest.

"Look you here, Michael! don't let there be any delay. I have done my best for you, and I say strike while the iron is hot; and I have another reason: I want the matter settled. I want to feel that Ruth is safe in your care; and then, old fellow, I shall be ready when my summons comes. It won't be long, first, you may make sure of that."

Michael was silent. Into the midst of his bewildering joy came the doubt: was Ruth willing to do this only from worldly motives? And then he remembered her frank, noble nature, and he felt he had wronged her. He could not, however, believe that he had won her love, though he thought it possible he might have betrayed his own.

"You have been very frank with me, old friend," he said, "and I will be equally frank. You are over-anxious about yourself. I hope and believe we shall keep you with us many years. Well, then, I should like to be less hurried; I should like to try and win

my precious girl's love little by little. I know how undeserving I am of it."

Bryant looked very grave; he had seen that this was the very thing from which Ruth shrank, and yet if he said so he might enlist Michael's pride against the suddenness of the engagement. He shook his head as he answered:

"I'm sorry, but it can't be. I couldn't stand it, man. I want it settled off-hand. Do you suppose I could have lived all these years with such a daughter as Ruth has been without knowing beforehand what the wrench will be of giving her up, even to such a husband as I know you will make her? No, Michael; either wait till I'm out of the way, or else take her with as little delay as possible. If I had my way I should wish the wedding fixed in a fortnight or so."

Clifford stared at him. The man's eagerness and the flush of excitement on his drawn face showed how deeply he was in earnest.

"That must rest with Miss Bryant," Clifford said. "Whatever you and she may determine will satisfy me." He paused, and a genial, happy smile overspread his face. "I can't believe in it yet; it seems too good, much too good to be true."

And as he rode back to Purley Michael's heart seemed to brim over with his thankfulness for the great joy that had so unexpectedly come into his life. It was not yet quite sure—he knew that—that this ardent, long-cherished wish would be gratified; but he could not think so hardly of Philip Bryant as to believe that he would mislead him about Ruth's consent. He was almost sure that she did not yet love

him; but then, he argued, a modest girl was not likely to know her own mind about a man who had hidden his feelings as he'd tried to hide his. She might, perhaps, have guessed his attachment; but Michael was old-fashioned enough to be high-toned about women, and he thought it was only due to Ruth that she should have a fit amount of courting before she could be expected to say she cared for him. Bryant's wish for a hurried marriage had seemed quite out of keeping with the reverent, worshipping character of the younger man's love.

Before he reached Purley, Michael began to think differently; he resolved that no time should be lost. It seemed to him that till now Ruth had been out of reach, barred away from him by the distance which he felt between them. So beautiful a woman, if she only could be seen by other men, would, he thought, attract a crowd of admirers; and her refinement would enable her to adapt herself to any station. Why, then, should he run the risk of losing her? Why should he hesitate when such a heaven of happiness was put within his reach?

"It is a mere question of vanity that makes me hesitate," he said to himself, as he reached the end of the long, dry high-road and saw the tall tower of Purley Church on the top of the height before him. "I want to be married for myself, and I am afraid this dear girl is only willing to take me for her father's sake, and wants to give him peace of mind respecting her. Well, I must take my chance. I have to make Ruth love me, and surely her love is worth all the trouble I may find in winning it."

He set his face resolutely, and dismissed the doubt

which his sister's news had created; he would stake his life on his darling's truth. If she had cared for any one else she would not have consented to her father's wishes.

He rode up the steep ascent at a quicker pace than usual, impatient to write the letter that was to decide his fate; and when he reached the old house in Broad Street he went direct to his study, although he longed to share his news with Dorothy. Perhaps a remembrance of their last talk about his love had something to do with his decision.

He wrote his letter; he pleaded his love as he felt it, strongly and simply. He told Ruth how long and hopeless it had been. He did not speak of her father's encouragement; he only said that he could no longer bear this uncertainty, and that unless she could give him a hope of winning her he must avoid the chance of seeing her. In reference to the haste enjoined by Mr. Bryant, he said that if she was good enough to listen to him he thought, for her father's sake, that a long engagement should be avoided, as Mr. Bryant was anxious to avoid delay.

He went out and posted his letter; but he could not at once go in and tell Dorothy. He felt strangely excited, and he walked rapidly away from the broad street and then across the market-place, till he reached the massive gray walls that surround Purley Castle.

He did not go in through the frowning, low-browed entrance gate, but, turning to the left, took his way outside the walls, and then through a couple of arched openings, till he paused on the top of the wooded hill from which the castle rises. There was a wooden bench here, just outside the dark gray wall of what

may have been in the old days some fair lady's bower; and seating himself he rested his back against the rough stone-work, while far below him, between the trunks of the stately elms that clothed the hill and almost hid the old gray towers from curious eyes, he could see the lovely river, winding its way between the slender birches that bent across it from either side, or foaming over the weir of the fulling-mill on the opposite bank.

Was it really true? he asked himself; and in a few weeks should he be sitting here with Ruth, his own dear wife, beside him? It was an almost bewildering joy to look forward to, and yet he still could not help wishing that it might be delayed a little. He pictured to himself the delight of watching the growth of Ruth's love. He knew she would be reticent at first; the very strength of her character warned him that she could not be otherwise. It seemed a robbery to both of them that this sweet wooing-time should be swept out of their lives. All at once he remembered Appledore and the new tenant with whom he had been in treaty, and who was ready to take possession as soon as the Bryants had left the farm. Yes, he must give up this wished-for sweetness, for Ruth's sake as well as for her father's; it would be best to avoid delay. Michael expected as a matter of course that Bryant would share his daughter's home, and he fancied that the relief which the marriage would bring to his friend's anxiety might soften the pain of leaving the house in which he had been born and in which all his life had been spent.

Michael Clifford was always happier when he could

find that the source of his own satisfaction was not wholly selfish. He rose up and went home to Dorothy.

He seated himself by her sofa and asked if she had had any visitors in his absence.

She kept her eyes intently fixed on his face as she answered:

"No, I have not seen any one; I have been thinking—thinking very hard, Michael." Then, with a sharp change of tone, "How did you find Mr. Bryant, and what has he been saying to you?"

Her brother started.

"I often say you are a witch, little one," he said tenderly; "you have such a faculty for guessing one's thoughts. I wonder"—he bent down and kissed her—"whether you know how full of gratitude I feel toward you for what you told Mr. Bryant?"

The flush of pleasure that had come with the sight of her brother suddenly faded, and left her paler than usual.

"I told Mr. Bryant a good many things," she said coldly; "but I know what you mean, Michael." She raised herself and sat upright. "Have you come to tell me you have proposed to Miss Bryant?"

"Yes, I have written to her; she was out while I was at Appledore."

"Ah!" She looked keenly at him, and then she put her tiny hand on his arm. "You poor dear fellow! I do hope you will be happy, but I can't help fearing."

He drew his arm roughly away and rose. That extraordinary spirit of contradiction which seems to possess a man at any mention of the woman he loves

had seized on Clifford. He stood very erect in front of his sister, ready to disagree with her next remark.

"I fancy your fear is quite unnecessary, Dorothy."

Her eyelashes quivered with the keen pain she felt. Ruth Bryant had then come already between them. She could not remember that Michael had ever before spoken to her in such a tone. She was inclined to keep silence, lest she should make him still more angry; and then that longing to do her duty by speaking out, a longing to which so many good women yield, and thereby stir up needless strife, overcame Dorothy's discretion.

"I hope so," she said; "but think for a moment what it would be for you to find yourself married to a girl who does not love you."

It was probably the presence of his own fear, the fear he had thought cast out, that made Michael feel suddenly beside himself with anger.

"We had better not discuss this subject," he said. "I used to think you were superior to other women, Dorothy, but I see women are all alike, hard-judging and prejudiced."

He turned away and left her, without even a glance at her imploring face.

Poor Dorothy hid her eyes in her little hands.

"Yes, I am all he says, but it is so hard to hear him say it," she thought, while tears trickled slowly between her fingers; "and I am a fool besides; I ought to know by this time that men are not quite the same when they are in love."

She sat thinking; suppose when she saw Ruth and

her brother together the girl's manner should confirm her fear? What could she do? She could do nothing to help Michael, for she knew that his infatuation would increase with every fresh meeting with his *fiancée*. She clasped her hands together in a kind of hopeless despair. She had spoken of her brother's love to Mr. Bryant because she hoped to find out that Ruth really cared for Michael, but Mr. Bryant's uneasy manner, and his silence just when he should have spoken, soon told this keen observer that he was as anxious on this point as she was; and it seemed impossible to the devoted sister that any one could know her brother as well as this girl knew him and yet remain insensible to him. Dorothy had felt confirmed in the opinion that Mrs. Buchan's story was true, and that Ruth Bryant had loved her father's pupil. It was quite natural, Miss Clifford thought, now that every one knew of Mr. Bevington's intended marriage, that Miss Bryant should be willing to marry the first man who asked her; but oh! that it had been any other man than Michael! Surely every one must admit that he deserved the first and best love that a good woman could give him; and although Dorothy tried hard not to be prejudiced, she could not bring herself to admit that a girl who met her lover secretly in the Mill Glen was quite good, or even nice. Why had she herself been so weak and foolish as to tell Mr. Bryant that she wished Michael to marry his daughter? Her feelings suddenly changed. "I am growing horrid," she said, "full of nasty prejudice; if I stay here I may perhaps spoil Michael's happiness. I will leave him in peace; I will write at once and

announce my coming to David; he will not spoil me, and he will find me plenty to do. I have been spoiled by my darling Michael, and in return I have wounded him just where he feels it most keenly; but I will make it straight with him before I go away."

CHAPTER XIX.

MICHAEL'S letter, written so fervently and showing how entirely his happiness hung in doubt till it was favorably answered, gave Ruth a feeling of nausea. She had gone up to her room to read it, for she knew it would contain this declaration, and now she stood leaning back against the dark-panelled wall of her bedroom, her clasped hands pressed on her lips.

"I cannot do it," she said to herself; "I cannot—I ought not to have promised."

She felt too weak and wretched to argue with herself. Going quickly downstairs she found Mrs. Voce clamoring for help. Bird had been making a final clearance of the raspberry harvest, and had also brought in a huge basketful of shining red currants. Sally was spreading the bright, downy raspberries out on cool-looking, blue-green cabbage-leaves. Her face almost matched the color of the fruit; excitement had given it a purple tinge.

"Drat the man! Much as I can do," she muttered irritably, "to get the sugar crushed an' the fruit boiled; betime it's stripped an' ready 'twill be dinner-hour. If a man be not a crab, he's safe to be a meddler."

Ruth went swiftly into the house-place and took her work-apron out of a cupboard beside the chimney-

piece; she was soon back in the kitchen, deftly stripping the glassy scarlet currant berries from their slender, tender green stalks into a huge yellow-lined dish which Sally had meantime placed ready for her. Possibly Sally's company was a help, though at the time the girl did not appreciate it; she would rather have been left in peace; but the running string of talk in which Mrs. Voce relieved her own mind and damaged the reputation of her neighbors prevented her young mistress from dwelling on her trouble. As the heap of fruit gradually became smaller Sally's tone sweetened and her face resumed its usual serenity.

"Thank you, miss," she said graciously, as Ruth strung the last few bunches. "I will say o' you, Miss Bryant, what can't be said of many another—you doesn't offer, you does. I shall get that there jam done first-rate; no thanks to Bird, all the same, for not taking me into counsel beforehand. My word, the men is all on the same pattern—don't ye find it so, miss?—fro' little George upwards; they acts on their own idees a deal more than's needful, so to say."

"You have spoiled George, Sally; it seems to me he must have been masterful before he was short-coated. He's worse than ever since he's had that sailor suit I saw him in last Sunday."

"Don't he look winsome in it, miss? But that were no doin' o' mine; no, Miss Bryant, 'twere Mr. Clifford gived it me for him, just because I chanced to say as you fancied the little lad."

Ruth turned away; she seemed to be hemmed in by this one subject. Her common sense, however,

had returned; she had made a mistake in calculating her mental strength and she must suffer, but she told herself she had made this offer to her father and she was bound to act up to it. Michael Clifford must have received some encouragement from her father or he would not have written to her. Well, then, she had no right to disappoint him and fling his hopes back in his face.

She went into the sitting-room. She could not write to accept Clifford as her husband from her own little desk upstairs on which she had written such tender letters to Reginald Bevington, and in which she still kept those he had sent her. It was the first time since his visit to Appledore that she had allowed herself to see him, as it were, full length. Hitherto, at the first thought of him she had turned away to something likely to blot out the pain of that woful memory; now, with a consciousness that this was her last opportunity, that in future she must put away from her every thought of that past so exquisitely dear—although she felt it had never truly been that which she fondly fancied—she sat leaning back musing over that first avowal of their love under the branching apple-trees, and then the happy meeting in the glen. Her lover *had* meant truly by her in those early days. Oh, yes! she was sure of it. She was yielding to her father's influence, and consenting to marry a man whom it seemed to her she could not love; why, then, should she blame Reginald Bevington for having obeyed his parents' wishes with regard to Miss Stretton? She forgave him the wrong he seemed to have meditated against herself, partly from her generous nature, partly because she

could not be certain that he would have so deceived her, and more than either of these two reasons, because she felt that she was going to do him such a wrong in bestowing herself on another man.

Suddenly the window was darkened in front of which the writing-table stood, and she saw her father looking in at her. He smiled at her and passed on, his crutches crunching into the gravel with so rasping a sound that Ruth felt a little ashamed of her self-absorption, for she had not noticed his approach. She took up her pen, and after a few minutes' thought she began her answer. It was lamentably stiff and formal, but the girl felt sure that Michael Clifford understood her well enough to know that she did not love him. She sighed next minute. "Poor fellow!" she thought, "perhaps he does not know as much about love as I do."

She left her letter in the hall, so that her father might see she had written; she could not bring herself to tell him in so many words that she had accepted Michael Clifford's offer. Bryant seemed greatly depressed when he came in, and when he was alone with his daughter after supper the evening passed almost in silence. Ruth rose at the usual time to summon Sally to help her father to his room, but he stopped her.

"Stay, child," he said, "I have a word to say before we part to-night. I have first to say thank you for being as kind and sensible as I think you have been, and next"—he saw she shrank from him, and he wanted to fix her attention—"I—I wanted to give you this." He put an envelope in her hand. "Not worth thanks, child," he said huskily, "only a frac-

tion of the sum that should have been yours; it's thirty pounds for your clothes."

She looked at him and then at the envelope; she could not understand how he came to possess such a sum, still less could she understand why he gave it to her.

Before she could utter the question on her lips, her father said eagerly, "You need not think the money came to me from—from any one; it is my own. I put it away a long time ago for my funeral expenses."

Ruth burst into sudden tears; she so seldom cried that her father was greatly distressed; he patted her shoulder.

"What is it? What is it, dear heart?" he said tenderly; then seeing that she was drying her eyes and trying to hide her agitation, he went on, "I want you to go so far as Purley to-morrow, my lass, and get your shopping over; I want you to spare me all the delay you can."

"I cannot go to Purley," she said cheerfully; "I will get what I want, but I would rather go to some place where I don't know people."

"There's Newbridge," he said, "if you don't mind going so far. You must take either Sally or Faith with you to help carry parcels and so on." The easily pleased man looked radiant with the idea that he had planned a pleasant excursion for his darling. "You'd best go from Church-Marshfield," he went on when he had said good-night, "then you can leave your heavy parcels at the station and get them sent out."

The weather was so bright next morning that Ruth

started on her journey soon after breakfast. She took Faith with her instead of Sally Voce; she felt that she was not in a humor for the old woman's comments on her purchases and the inquiries to which they would give rise.

They left the station at the foot of the bustling, busy High Street of Newbridge, and came up the steep hill past the ancient grammar school, now turned into the town library, past the flourishing hotel with its old sign-board projected over the entrance, while nearly opposite, though standing back and partly hidden by a square of its own, was the venerable parish church. Along the street were plenty of thriving shops, many of them with quaint sign-boards, and above these the ancient gabled and half-timbered houses; these became more numerous as the street, seemingly tired of its ascent, began to go down hill as steeply as it had mounted, to the modern market-house below. A quaint street of old houses crossed it here and led down on the right to the river.

It was Wednesday, market-day at Newbridge, and Ruth saw how longingly Faith looked at the people as they disappeared from the street into the market-house.

"We will go through," she said, and Faith looked radiant.

Ruth could not have said why she went in, for she had little time to spare, and the crowd within made passage slow. On one side were ranged long lines of fruit and vegetable stalls, behind which the sellers were chiefly women; on the other side was a great and varied display of poultry and eggs, butter of

varied yellows, set off by cool green leaves; while here and there was the pale primrose of a cream cheese, displayed for a while as a bait to a passer-by, and then again carefully shrouded in muslin. Ruth smiled and sighed as she looked at the rosy, eager faces of the market women, some of them evidently farmers' wives, who had come in to sell their own farm products.

"I might have earned something for father if I had been brought up to do this," the girl thought; "we only get half price from that shop at Purley, compared with what these people are asking; and we might sell far more than we do."

She sighed again; it seemed to her that she had been brought up above her station in life, and she was in fact very useless compared with the girls, young women, and matrons, some of whom, nicely and neatly dressed, sat behind their chickens and their dairy produce.

It was too late now, she told herself, for regrets; that part of her life was ended; she should even have to give up her favorite employment of gardening. She knew, from what Mr. Clifford had told her, that there was scarcely any garden to the house in Broad Street.

"Come along," she said briskly to Faith; and she turned to leave the market-house by the way they had come. Faith wondered why Miss Bryant suddenly stopped; looking up at her mistress the maid saw that she had turned pale; Faith thought Miss Bryant was going to faint, her paleness was so ghastly. She took firm hold of Ruth's arm and led her back to the lower end of the market, which was

far less crowded than the entrance had been. There was a drinking fountain, and the girl asked if Miss Bryant would not like a drink of cold water. "'Twas the heat what made you faint-like, miss," she said.

"I'm all right, thank you," Ruth said slowly; and she went up a street that led to the shop she had been making for when she turned aside into the market-place. She had walked briskly up the hill from the station, but now, though she was on the level, her feet seemed leaden; she felt as if she had been stunned by a blow, and truly she had received a blow that for the time had stupefied her.

She had seen Reginald Bevington standing just within the market; he was with a tall, fair lady, his mother, Ruth believed. The sad, gloomy expression on his face had gone to the girl's heart; but for Faith's prompt action she might possibly have stood still till the pair came up to her, for they were moving in her direction.

CHAPTER XX.

DOROTHY had settled to break her journey at Carlisle, and stay a few days with a friend she had there; this halt would be useful in several ways; it would give her brother David time to expect her, it would lessen her own fatigue, and it would give her the opportunity of seeing her cherished Carlisle friend, whom she had once fondly hoped Michael would marry. Miss Letitia Vareham had money, and she was good and affectionate. Michael had acknowledged all this, but he had been perverse enough to add that Dorothy's paragon was two years older than he was, and he also saw that she was very plain and dull. While Dorothy superintended the packing of her boxes, she was sorrowfully thinking over this perversity of Michael's.

"It is strange," she said; "he is fastidious enough in some things, and yet in a matter that surely is of the utmost importance to his future happiness he seems determined to take everything on trust. I begin to think that love not only blinds a man, but also takes away his wits."

She felt nearly sure that Michael's offer had been accepted by Miss Bryant; he had looked so happy when he came in to wish her good-morning, for she often breakfasted in her room. He had been troubled

when she said she was so soon leaving him, but he had not pressed her to stay; he felt that it would be a trial to her to be put in the second place, and it was possible that at first she and Ruth might not suit one another.

"You will come back to us later," he said, smiling as he left her room; but in truth he was too much excited to dwell on the parting, for he had received Ruth's answer to his proposal, and he was going to Appledore this afternoon as soon as he could get away from business.

And though Dorothy yearned to spend every hour of these last days with her brother, her good sense warned her that he and she were far more likely to maintain their old tender relations if they kept apart as much as possible during the time that was left.

"I am simply horrid," she thought. "I pray against spitefulness and all its nasty, mean ways, and yet directly I see Michael I long to make him think less well of the girl. If I could only believe she loved him, perhaps I should be better; and yet even then I don't know that I should feel reconciled. Yes, I am horrid, and all my life I have gone on fancying that I despised jealous people."

She sighed, and decided that whatever pain this change of home might bring to her, it was undoubtedly much happier for her brother Michael that she should go away.

It was afternoon before Mr. Clifford could get away to Appledore. Everything looked at its best in the mellow sunshine; a few fleecy, snow-white clouds lay lazily on the blue, as if they were enjoying the warmth; the sky itself was a deeper blue than usual,

and looked almost hard against the soft whiteness of the cloud masses.

He could scent the honeysuckle from the gate as he rode down to it, and a hopeful smile overspread his face as he pictured Ruth fastening a spray of the flower in his button-hole. He saw Philip Bryant sitting in his old place in the porch, and looking almost as well as ever.

He even shouted out in his old hearty way, when he saw his visitor, for a boy to come and take Mr. Clifford's horse.

"Send it round to the stable-man," he said. "You are come to stay the afternoon, aren't you?"

The suppressed joy in Bryant's tone added to Clifford's hope. He told himself that he ought not to have been depressed by the stiffness of Ruth's note; he could not expect her to show any warmth of feeling for him till she became more accustomed to look on him as her lover. It was a crushing disappointment to hear that she had gone to Newbridge.

"If you had let me know," he said, "I would have gone in and seen her safe home."

Bryant smiled at his impatient tone.

"She'll be back soon now," he said; "don't you bother your head about her. Ruth is well able to take care of herself; she has the little maid with her to carry her parcels."

Clifford looked dissatisfied; he talked for a few minutes with his friend, but his thoughts strayed to Ruth. At last he gave an answer so completely at cross-purposes that Bryant laughed.

"There! go your ways, man," he said; "go your ways. If you start at once you're safe to meet her

near Church-Marshfield; she must come by this train; the next one won't save daylight, long as it stays with us now."

He looked graver when Clifford had left him to walk toward Marshfield, for he suddenly remembered that this meeting was the sort of thing against which Ruth had protested when she asked him to spare her a love-scene with Michael Clifford.

"I hope she'll be kind to the poor chap." But he felt nervous for a while; then he laughed at his own scruples. It was only nonsense, he thought, the unreal notion of a girl who had never had a lover; for though he was fairly confident that Ruth had had a fancy for some one while she stayed at her aunt's, she had said that she was free from any engagement. It was therefore evident that she had never had an accepted lover. After all, the hopeful man thought, this unexpected meeting might prove a useful step in the courtship.

"Anyway, it gives him no end of a chance," the farmer ended, "if he only knows how to use it; but he wants devil, does Michael."

Meanwhile Michael was walking as fast as he could along the high-road. He longed to feast his eyes with the sight of his darling. His? It seemed impossible to believe that she had really consented to become his wife. He walked at such a rapid pace that he was close to the village before he saw her coming.

She did not see him; she walked with her head bent forward and her eyes fixed on the ground. Faith walked some way behind her with a boy from the station carrying the remainder of the parcels;

these two were laughing and chatting merrily, and Ruth looked sad by contrast.

Clifford quickened his pace and soon joined her; she smiled faintly as she recognized him, but he thought she seemed ill at ease. This, however, was only a momentary idea; his excitement took away his power of reflection. They stood still a few minutes while he greeted her. Then he said, "Will you not send your parcels on? We can follow more slowly."

"Very well," she said in a subdued voice that was quite foreign to her bright, saucy manner. He thought this dutiful submissiveness was very sweet; but while Ruth was telling Faith and the boy to hurry home, and while she stood aside to let them pass, Michael was wishing the old manner would come back. The saucy, provoking Ruth was the girl who had won his love years ago; this quiet, subdued young lady was quite another person. He felt piqued to try and provoke at any rate a saucy answer.

"I have to thank you very much," he said, "for your most kind answer to my hopes. I know," he went on with increasing fervor, for as he looked at Ruth and realized the prize he had won his manner became more and more earnest, "I know, and I deeply feel, that I am unworthy of you; but if you will let me, dear girl, I think I can make you happy."

He paused, but she walked on beside him in silence, her eyes fixed on the ground; she was evidently listening to him, and he felt encouraged to go on with most unusual eloquence.

"I have loved you for so long, dearest Ruth." His voice had sunk to a low, tender tone that puzzled his

companion; she had not guessed at this depth of feeling in a business man like Michael Clifford, and it troubled her; it seemed a mere mockery of the love she knew so well, but at the same time it warned her that her life with this husband would be more difficult than she had counted on. "It sometimes seems as if I could not remember a time when I did not love you, Ruth."

She felt obliged to make some answer, and she murmured that she was grateful to him for his devotion; she raised her eyes as she said this; met so much ardor expressed in his that she instantly looked away lest she should betray the shrinking she felt from him.

His mood had changed; he felt rashly determined to find out her feelings toward him.

"I should have preferred to wait," he said, "till I could have a more decided hope that you—you cared for me; but when I consulted your father he urged me not to delay; he seemed to think I had lost time already. I know this sounds cowardly, as if I were trying to shelter myself; well, dear girl," he went on, a passion of tenderness in his voice, "I own that I am a coward about vexing or thwarting you. Your kind answer was a great relief, for it showed me that I had not vexed you. I have told my dear old friend that I leave you to settle the length of our engagement" (he paused, but she listened quietly, without raising her eyes); "I think you will agree with me that it will be better if possible so to arrange that your father will only have one removal; I mean had he not better go straight from Appledore to Broad Street?"

She looked up quickly.

“How about your sister?”

Her calm, matter-of-fact tone chilled him.

“My sister leaves me on Thursday for Scotland,” he said; “she is only happy when she is useful, and she can be very useful to my brother David’s children; he has lost his wife. I was to say from Dorothy that she regrets being unable to make your acquaintance, but there was no help for it.”

Ruth was slowly growing desperate. That glimpse at Reginald Bevington’s sad, and, as she thought, repentant face, had shown her how passionately she still loved him, and had suddenly opened her eyes to the reality of what she was doing and had promised to do. She must free herself from this danger. How could she marry Clifford when his talk of love sickened her so that she longed for any means of escape from him, so that she might think. While she struggled with this longing she remembered that now the hay was cut there was a short way home across one of the Appledore meadows, and that they were drawing near the stile which led from this meadow into the road. This remembrance restored her self-control, and she listened with less pre-occupation when Michael went on speaking.

“Do you agree with me,” he said, “that our marriage had better take place before your father gives up the farm?”

Every step was bringing them nearer the stile, and Ruth felt nerved to speak more boldly than she could have spoken if she had had to walk another half mile beside him.

With the prospect of escape her mind was freer,

more able to see things really. It was, she felt, untrue and therefore degrading to allow Michael Clifford to go on in ignorance of her real feelings toward him; it was acting a falsehood.

Her continued silence was trying him almost beyond his power of endurance.

"You will understand," he said nervously, "that your feelings in this matter will guide me far more than my regard for what is probably likely to be best for your father?"

They were close to the stile. Ruth stood still; she looked at him fully, and she kept her eyes fixed unflinchingly on his, in spite of the love she saw glowing in them. She had made up her mind; she dared not tell Mr. Clifford all the truth; it seemed to her that what had passed between her and Reginald Bevington was her own; it only concerned her now, and no one had a right to share that sorrowful yet sweet memory. But she could not be so false as to let this man suppose that she had any love for him. It was a struggle to begin to say this, but when she had begun her words came far more easily than she had expected. She was so little in sympathy with Clifford at this moment that she could not realize the pain she gave.

"I am not anxious for delay," she said calmly, "but I wish you not to expect more from me than I can give you. This has all come so suddenly upon me that I have hardly had time to think about my feelings." Her eyes fell at last under his searching glance; her words were in a sense true, but she knew they did not contain the whole truth about her feelings. "You know, you must know"—the appeal in

her voice moved him—"that I think of you as my father's, as our best friend, and"—she looked up at him, "I will try to be a good and faithful wife to you; but please to be patient with me; I only ask you not to take me away from my father, even for a day, till his strength comes back and he is quite himself again."

Clifford was deeply touched, but that did not prevent him from being greatly cast down.

"Surely," he said pleadingly, "you would not mind leaving him for a week. You were not with him while he was at Purley. I propose that he should go with us from the church to Broad Street, and that we should leave him there in charge of Mrs. Voce until we come back; you see he would not feel strange, having been there so lately."

Ruth shook her head.

"Please don't think me obstinate," she spoke gently but firmly; "I cannot leave him even for that short time. All this change will excite and agitate him. Who can say that a moment after we have left him he may not be again struck down? I should not have a peaceful moment if I were to leave him at such a time. If—if anything were to happen to him it would sadden all my life."

He bent his head; he was displeased and disappointed, but he was not quick at rejoinder, and he found no power to resist her.

"It shall be as you wish," he said slowly; then, as if he struggled with his own self-control, "Am I to understand that you will fix a date with Mr. Bryant, and that you wish me to arrange everything with him?"

She gave him a bright smile, the first brightness he had seen in her face since their meeting. "Thank you, yes; that will be very kind." They had reached the stile and she turned toward it. "Please do not think me ungracious," she said, "but I want to be alone; I have had a tiring day, and my head aches past bearing. I will go this way. Good-by."

She nodded, and then without further leave-taking she vaulted over the stile and was speeding across the meadow with long gliding steps, before he had recovered from his surprise at this sudden desertion.

He stood looking after her, ready to gnash his teeth with anger at his own stupidity. He told himself he ought to have spoken out when she gave him such a chance; he ought to have told her that he was not willing to take her for his wife on such terms. He might have said he was willing to wait any time she chose to name for the joy of calling her his wife, if she could bring herself to feel more tenderly toward him, but that he would not marry a woman who was only willing to take him from a feeling of gratitude.

While he stood debating with himself whether he should follow her and tell her he retracted his offer. Ruth passed out of sight; and by some strange magic, now that he could no longer see her in actual presence, the remembrance of her beauty, of all that made her to him so irresistible, so bewitching, seized him with renewed strength. He began to chide himself for faint-heartedness. She must think him a timid fool; he had not even held her hand in his, he had not attempted the slightest approach to a caress. No true woman would allow herself to be won in such a

tepid way as that. He resolved that the next meeting should happen in-doors, and he would then try whether a tenderer, warmer mode of wooing would not soften her and break down the terrible barrier which now seemed to keep them so coldly apart.

CHAPTER XXI.

MICHAEL'S resolution was not carried into action. He saw his sister off next morning, and in the afternoon he received a note from Appledore, written by Ruth from her father's dictation. The marriage was fixed for that day three weeks. Philip Bryant urged that it might not be delayed beyond that period; he wrote that he was willing to leave the farm on Michael's wedding-day, if this was thought advisable. Inside the envelope, on a crumpled bit of paper and in a crabbed writing, were these words, "Leave Ruth alone a couple of days; she's shy. P. B."

Michael twisted the bit of paper angrily between his fingers, and then tore it into fragments. He felt angry and impatient. If Ruth were shy, that was only a natural feeling, far more likely to be overcome in his presence than in his absence. He was half tempted to disregard the foolish suggestion and to ride over at once to Appledore; for the next day he would have to spend at Newbridge, where he would probably sleep. He reflected, however, that the note might have been suggested by Ruth, although she did not write it; and he felt that it would be unkind to thwart her. It seemed incredible that in three weeks she would be his own, his wife; thenceforth nothing need evermore part them. His eyes brightened, his chest swelled and broadened; the man's

whole figure seemed to dilate with an ineffable sense of joy and triumph, as he murmured the refrain of a German song which he had sometimes sung to please Dorothy.

"She is mine, she is mine ; she has told me she is mine."

The last phrase was true, but not in the sense he desired.

"Well"—he had stood thinking for a while—"I believe I expect too much. A French girl is not expected to love her future husband till after the ceremony of marriage. It must surely be my own fault if I cannot teach my darling to love me in the future."

Michael did not note that the naming of his wedding-day, with the secure feeling it had given him, had completely blotted out his desire to wait for his happiness till Ruth had learned to love him.

He was an untiring man of business, but he always found time before he left his room to read each morning a few verses from an "Imitatio" which his mother had given him when he left school. This morning his reading had ended with the verse, "For man proposes, but God disposes; for man's way is not in himself." He had a slightly uneasy feeling as he put the book down, but he had to hurry over his breakfast to get the early train for Newbridge; he had also to see the paper-hanger and plasterer. Then he gave orders to other work-people about various alterations he wished completed in the house before Ruth became its mistress.

When these orders were given he started for Newbridge. He thought that if all went well, and he

found the people he had to see there disengaged, he might get back to Purley that night by the last train, or at any rate he should get one which left Newbridge at five in the morning; but of this there was no certainty. He felt full of energy and determination, as he saw how much had to be done before his marriage. He decided that if Ruth still refused to leave her father they would take Mr. Bryant away with them, for he longed to get a few days' holiday with his wife before he settled down to regular work-a-day existence as a married man. They would go, he thought, if Ruth approved, to a little seaside place on the Welsh coast—not too long a journey for the invalid, and where the scenery would delight Ruth and the fine air would strengthen her father.

He was planning all this as he sat in the railway carriage, and unconsciously repeated to himself the refrain of the song. All at once the vision that had filled his mind left him, and he seemed to hear the words, "Man proposes, man proposes," and nothing else except the shrill whistle of the engine as it neared a tunnel.

When he reached Newbridge his business soon absorbed him to the exclusion of every other thought. It was doubtless this singular power of concentration that enabled Michael Clifford to grasp all questions submitted to him so conclusively and so firmly that his opinion on, or his solution of, a difficulty at once carried weight with it. His reputation already extended far beyond his own county. To-day, before he had half finished his business in Newbridge, he was met by a request that he would go on next morning to Chester, his presence there being, he was

told by one of his clients, absolutely necessary in regard to the valuation of an estate about to be purchased by the brother of the said client.

He did not, therefore, return to Purley till late in the afternoon of the day after he had left it—too late, he knew, to go on to Appledore.

At breakfast next day a letter reached him from Miss Letitia Vareham; it begged him to come at once to his sister. Dorothy had seemed ill on her first arrival, the writer said, but next morning she was in such an excited and fevered state that Miss Vareham called in a doctor; he pronounced the patient to be very seriously ill, and suggested that a nurse should be sent for. Michael rubbed his forehead with the palm of his strong, brown hand. He loved Dorothy very dearly, but he was only human. To-morrow was Sunday, and he had counted on spending it at Appledore.

Obstacles seemed to be thickening on the path of a better understanding with his darling Ruth. He smiled at himself. Was not all this contradiction and thwarting of purpose an omen of future happiness? The course of true love was proverbially hindered. Only the arranged and wealthy marriages in which love was not a necessary condition went on evenly, without let or hindrance, till they were accomplished; it was the “afterwards” with them that was full of thorny disappointments.

But by the time Clifford was half way on his journey to Carlisle he was thinking more of Dorothy than of Ruth. Dorothy had always been so good to him! She had never said so to Michael, but his brother David had told him years ago that their sis-

ter might have been married if she had not devoted herself to make a home for her youngest brother when her father died. He rejoiced that he had not consented to Dorothy's idea of leaving him. He resolved that when he had gained Ruth's love he would persuade his sister to spend a large part of every year with them, even if she would not consent to look on the old house in Broad Street as her home.

It was a terrible shock when he reached his destination to find that Dorothy was so ill that she did not recognize him; it was not possible that he could leave her till there was a favorable change. He wrote to Mr. Bryant and to Ruth to explain the reason of his continued absence from Appledore. He also wrote to a friend of his in Purley to ask him to keep watch on the work-people he was employing about his house, so that all might be ready. He had engaged the friend to be his best man at the wedding, and he still hoped that Dorothy would recover so that it might take place at the appointed time.

CHAPTER XXII.

IT was the day before the wedding. Ruth had been restless since early morning. She had risen about five o'clock, and had gone round the farm, visiting every little nook and corner of the place in which she had spent her young life. She was in sore distress. The news of Miss Clifford's illness had come to her with the relief of a reprieve: it seemed to the girl that it must defer the wedding; and then, when she learned that the crisis of the fever was over, and that Dorothy was pronounced out of danger, the revulsion came. Ruth saw the extent of her mistake; she was tangled in a net of her own making, and she longed with all the strength of her nature to free herself from her promise to marry Clifford.

This longing had been greatly increased a few days ago. Michael Clifford had returned to Purley, and had come over next day to Appledore. Ruth forced herself to receive him kindly, and she found this easier than she had expected, because she was not alone with him. Philip Bryant was not so well, and he lay on the sofa during Michael's visit. Ruth went to the door with Mr. Clifford, but she talked persistently of his sister and her illness. He held her hand a moment as they parted, and then he bent over her and kissed her cheek.

She did not draw back, but a deep flush overspread her face, and she kept her eyes fixed on the ground.

She had not seen him since, for an accumulation of business kept him at work from early morning till late; but he had asked leave to spend this last evening at the farm, as there were many things he wished to arrange, he said, both with her and with her father. Ruth was walking up and down the gravel path beneath her window. She had at first begun by reasoning with herself on the almost childish repugnance she felt toward her marriage, but her efforts at this self-conquest were fruitless; they seemed to recoil on herself, and to stir up a feeling of intolerable shrinking from Michael Clifford. She looked up at her window as she passed beneath it, and pictured the figure of Reginald Bevington pausing below it, as he had so often done, till she seemed to hear his soft, refined voice calling her to come out. She shivered, and suddenly broke loose from all the specious reasoning she had been repeating so mechanically to herself.

"I cannot do it, I will not do it; it is unnatural, it is horrible!"

In the midst of this tempest of feeling, that seemed to sway her to and fro, as the west wind sways some tall and slender tree, she was trying to keep an outward calm. "Besides, I know it will make me wicked; I—I—shall learn to hate Michael when he is really my husband; I—I shall wish he were Reggy." She stood still a moment thinking. "It must be stopped," she said firmly. "I could not answer for myself if I were to be made so miserable. Who knows? I might be tempted to put an end to my life,

or to run away. Such a marriage cannot bring happiness to Michael or to any one else. I shall speak to him to-night."

A soothing calm passed over her as she saw a chance of escape. She walked up and down, trying to plan some way of effecting it. In her present mood she felt desperate enough to make an appeal to Michael himself. Surely if she confessed to him that she still loved Reginald Bevington he would set her free. But almost as the idea came she saw she must have her father's sanction for such an appeal. A sudden withdrawal on Michael's part might bring back the trouble of mind which had caused the illness in the spring. Ruth had not much reliance on his judgment, but he was her father; and children seem to have sometimes a superstitious belief in the reserves of a parent's wisdom—this, be it said, when they are themselves in trouble, and think that a father or mother is bound to help them.

She went in to seek her father; he was not in his usual place in the porch: she found him on the sofa in the parlor, not lying down, but leaning against the cushions with a look of suffering on his face.

"What is it, dear?" she said tenderly.

"Only my head," he answered. "I feel so faint and dizzy."

She saw that he must not be disturbed, and she determined to wait till after his afternoon nap. At dinner-time he said he felt all right again, and afterward he declined Ruth's proposal that he should lie down as usual in his own room:

"Well, no, child," he answered. "This is our last day; let us be together."

She rose and kissed him even more affectionately than usual; and then, when she had placed him comfortably on his sofa, they talked for a while about ordinary things which had no interest to either of them.

Ruth's restlessness had increased as the day wore on. She now began to walk up and down the room till she taxed her father's patience.

"What ails you, darling?" he said. "I thought I was fidgety enough, but you beat me. Your dear mother would have said you must have got quicksilver in your boots!"

She stopped, and turning round she smiled at him; but he thought she seemed sad.

"I believe," she said in a hurried, nervous tone that was wholly foreign to her, "in fact I know that I cannot rest or be at peace until I have spoken to you, father; only I am afraid of worrying you and bringing back your headache."

"My head is right enough," he said; "tell out your trouble, my girl, if it will ease you."

Her way was clear enough now, and she could not speak; her lips felt parched and dry, and her tongue seemed powerless. She tried to speak, but no words came, and her blue eyes fixed themselves on her father in a strained gaze almost like that of some poor hunted creature in dread of pursuit.

Her father's face reflected the trouble he saw in her eyes, and unconsciously he broke the spell that chained her tongue.

"What is it, my Ruthie?" he said tenderly. "Tell your father—won't you, pet?—what 'tis that's troub-

ling you. A trouble is half the weight to carry when 'tis shared, honey."

She knelt down beside him and hid her eyes on his shoulder.

"I don't know," she said wearily; she felt her burden was too heavy to carry any farther. "I'm afraid, sorely afraid, that in telling you I may simply shift sorrow from myself to you. Well, dear, it's this. Please forgive me, but I cannot keep my promise; I must tell Michael Clifford when he comes that I cannot be his wife to-morrow."

Bryant's face flushed till the girl felt frightened. When he spoke his voice sounded thick and broken, like that of a drunkard.

"I'm ruined, then—a ruined, disgraced man, who can never show his face again among decent folks! Ruined by my own child! Ruth, Ruth! I could not have expected this of you!"

He pressed his hand over his eyes and sank back on the sofa cushions.

Ruth rose from her knees: she felt like a criminal; she could not plead her own cause; the agony in her father's tone had completely unnerved her. There was silence; then all at once he sat upright and looked sternly at her.

"What is your reason for this extraordinary change? You must have a reason." His tone as he said this was calmer than she expected.

She had resolved to tell him her secret, but even if she had not so determined she was by this time too much overwrought to hesitate.

"I love another man."

Her voice was steady, and she kept her eyes fixed on his face, from which the deep flush had not yet faded.

Her father did not answer at once; he sat rubbing his hands one against the other; he seemed lost in thought.

"This man you love," he said slowly, "loves you, I suppose?" She bent her head. "He is perhaps not rich enough to marry you for some time to come. Is that so? You told a falsehood, then, when you said you were free?"

Ruth had dreaded this question; she hung her head; she could not meet her father's eyes as she answered:

"I am free in that way; I have no hope that he will ever be able to marry me."

Her father's face changed; a heavy frown settled on it.

"Then you have no right to go on caring for him; he must be a mere trifler, a weak, philandering fool—worse still, I doubt. How dared the fellow try to win the affection of such a girl as you are, when he knew he could not marry you?" He uttered an oath, which alarmed her—it was so unlike him. "You are not the girl to—to fling yourself in the way of a man who did not seek you. I've seen that for myself."

"Perhaps I——" she began, but he checked her.

"Let that subject be dead and buried," he burst out angrily—so very angrily that she remembered with terror the doctor's warning that he must never be allowed to excite himself. "I will not hear another syllable about your folly. You have lowered

my opinion of your sense in letting me know that you yielded to such an infatuation. Never speak of it to any one. Turn your back on it, and be thankful that only your father has learned it from you."

Whether her confession had robbed her of more strength than she had to spare, or whether this new, strange eloquence in her father had frightened away the determined resolution with which she had strung herself up to speak, Ruth felt stupefied and helpless. The net from which she had momentarily freed herself once more closed round her, and as her father went on speaking the hope of possible escape faded away.

"You have told your story, Ruth," he went on more quietly; "now I will tell you mine. You have heard some of it before, but my risk has become heavier. Did I make you fully understand that Michael is my only creditor, that everything we have—the very clothes we wear—are all paid for by his money? If he withdraws his help I must either go to the workhouse or die in a ditch. Perhaps I told you this before; I am in a far worse position now."

He stopped abruptly, with such a look of utter misery on his face that Ruth feared some fresh misfortune had befallen him.

"Tell me what has made things worse, father?" she said.

He shrugged his shoulders with discontent.

"Such a question to ask! As easy for you to know as for me." He thought she was affecting this ignorance, and so making it more painful to him to explain. Philip Bryant had not been considered selfish by those who loved him, because of his sin-

gularly genial and winning manner. Even Sally Voce, prejudiced as she had been against him, had grown devoted to his service since she had been in daily contact with him; and in her present extremity Ruth blamed herself far more for having agreed to her father's wishes than she blamed him for having urged Michael's suit on her acceptance. She waited now for him to go on speaking; by this time she had learned that he would not bear a grievance in silence.

"The only hope I had of paying that poor chap back, or of making him any sort of compensation, was in your being good to him, Ruth. You said you were free, and so I took it for granted you would be able to care for him. Instead of that you've gone and done what I never looked to see your mother's daughter do: you've led the poor fellow on; you've cherished his hopes, I may say, till he's a hundred times more in love with you than he was a month ago. He has begun to feel sure of you, and now you want to dash all his hopes. I never thought you'd prove so heartless—never!"

Something in Ruth protested, but as she looked at his saddened face, still slightly drawn on one side, she felt that her opposition was selfish. She could only be unhappy; she was that already, and there was, so far as she could see, no brightness in the solitary life that lay before her. She could evidently make her father happy if she gave up her own will in this matter; and Michael had said he would be satisfied if she would try to love him. Would he be happy if he knew the truth? Before she could satisfy herself on this head her father began to speak again. His voice trembled with agitation.

"You must take your choice. Michael will soon be here, so you have not much time to decide in. I want you to understand fully what you are about. The disgrace of finding myself a pauper, unable to pay a penny that I owe, will certainly kill me; it is not possible that I can survive such a shock. But I do not want to be selfish, my girl," he said in a gentler tone than he had used since the beginning of the talk, for he felt just now full of heroic self-sacrifice; "I am trying to study you entirely in this affair. You have got to choose between the indulgence of this hopeless fancy—I understood you to say that it is a hopeless fancy—and my life."

He had so exhausted himself that he burst into tears and covered his face with his handkerchief.

Ruth felt a touch of anger; she thought her father must know that she could not hesitate in the choice he offered her. But her anger passed quickly as she put her arms round him and felt that he was quivering with emotion.

"Hush, dear, dearest father!" she whispered; "forget what I told you. I see there is no way but this one."

"God bless you, my dear, good child!" He kissed her fondly as he spoke, but his words sank like lead upon her heart. She could hardly return his loving kisses. She felt crushed, enslaved; all spontaneous power of action or expression had left her. She put her hand on the back of the nearest chair, for she was faint and unsteady.

Her father saw her sudden paleness, but he would not allude to it.

"You had better rest, darling," he said tenderly.

"Go and lie down; I will send for you when Michael and I have finished our talk."

Philip Bryant's excitement seemed to have braced him; he sat thinking after Ruth had left him. He finally decided not to give her the chance of speaking to Michael Clifford except in his presence.

"'Tis all for her own good," he thought. "When they are man and wife she will hold her tongue for her own sake."

Sally Voce came in presently to look for Miss Bryant; the rector had sent her a present; but her father said she was to be left undisturbed; she was not even to be told when Mr. Clifford came.

"Show him in to me, Sally; I have to speak to him alone. You can fetch Miss Ruth when I tell you to do so."

He spoke with so much dignity that the old woman looked surprised.

"The idee that the poor man should take to being masterful!" she said to herself, as she went back to her kitchen.

Sally made up for want of feeling by sharpness of observation. Her keen perception led her to almost as correct a conclusion as the most sympathetic insight would have done. She was entirely dissatisfied with Mr. Clifford's courtship. He might have stayed a day or two with his sister, she thought; but to neglect Miss Ruth and "his reg'lar opportoonities" in the way he had done was something unheard of, she told herself, considering how very short the courting-time had been.

"'Tis enough to set Miss Ruth agin him; and his gifts isn't up to the mark, neither. There now! if

Voce had brought me a parcel of books instead of trinkets an' such like when he was coortin', Lor'! I'd pretty quick have given him the cold shoulder. I grant he's as good as gold, is Mr. Clifford; but he knows no more about young women's fancies than a Jew knows about roast pork; he'll maybe be wiser by an' by. Lor'! you can't roast a jint without practice."

Sally had even begun to entertain a doubt about the warmth of Clifford's love; but when he at last arrived at the farm, he looked so radiantly happy that she felt ashamed of having wronged him.

Ruth pinched her pale cheeks when she came downstairs in answer to her father's summons.

Michael had come out into the hall to meet her, and he stood at the foot of the stairs. She let him kiss her and put his arm round her for a moment without any sign of annoyance; she did not, however, linger with him, but passed on into the parlor where her father sat anxiously looking for her.

"Michael and I have settled it all, my dear," he said gravely; "and now you must open the rector's parcel and see what he has been good enough to send you."

Ruth looked at him gratefully. The parcel took some time to open, and when the Bible and Prayer-book it contained had been duly admired they had to be replaced in their numerous wrappings. Then there were inquiries to be made for Dorothy, and after that Ruth did not know what next to say.

Once more her father came to her help; he began a series of anecdotes about his sister, Mrs. Whishaw's wedding, and after these were exhausted, about his

own. This last topic checked his sudden flow of gayety; but after a short silence he began to ask Michael questions about the seaside place to which they were going to-morrow.

Ruth tried to be cheerful, but Michael felt that it was hard to expect gayety from either father or daughter on the eve of leaving their old home. He wished now that it had not been so arranged, but it was too late to alter plans. Soon after tea he rose to say good-by, feeling that they would probably like to be together on this last evening.

He went to the sofa and shook hands with Philip Bryant; then he turned to the door, in the hope that Ruth would follow him into the hall for leave taking.

Ruth, however, saw no reason why she should not bid him good-by before her father. She put her hand in his, but his warm clasp did not bring a flush to her cheek; and to his surprise she held up her face to be kissed.

There was nothing to complain of, and yet he felt dissatisfied; he did not care for this formal show of affection, and as he mounted his horse he told himself that Ruth might have given him a few minutes alone with her. Presently, as he rode along the quiet highroad, already whitened by the rising moon, he rebuked himself. Ruth knew that she would belong to him to-morrow. She had been unwilling to rob her father of a moment of the time in which she was still entirely his.

"Come here, darling," Bryant said, when he and Ruth were left alone. "Kiss me, my Ruth. You have behaved nobly in this matter; I pray God may bless you for your goodness, and he will. You are

sure of a good husband, and a far better home than your poor ruined father could ever have given you, child." He paused and wiped his eyes; then in a more cheerful tone, "You will bless this day, child; and before very long, either, you will bless your father for the part he took in bringing it about."

He looked at her wistfully, as if he hoped even then for thanks, but Ruth's strength was spent; she smiled in answer, but she only said:

"I think you have had discussion enough to-day, father; won't you go to bed earlier than usual, so that you may not be over-tired to-morrow?"

He answered that he was not tired, but he looked excited; and Ruth rang for Sally Voce to help him to his room. She bade him good-night, and then she abruptly left him, so as to meet Sally in the hall.

The old woman came out of the door leading to the house-place rubbing her small eyes with the backs of her chubby, pink fists, till it seemed as if she must pound them into her head.

"Please leave the front door unfastened," Ruth said in a low voice; "I want to take a last turn round the place in the moonlight; there'll not be time to-morrow. But you need not speak of it to father, Sally; he's sad enough already at leaving. Good-night! I'll lock up all right when I come in."

Sally Voce stared suspiciously out of her small eyes, as she said good-night to Miss Bryant. What was the gal up to now? the old woman wondered. She looked just as white and miserable as a body could look; not a scrap like a happy bride.

"I shall just keep an eye on her," Sally thought; "and I've more than half a mind to tell Mr. Bryant."

Meantime Ruth had gone upstairs. There was no hope of escape for her now, and her despair made her reckless. Only the thought of her father kept her from going out alone into the world. It seemed to her that to walk on and on along the road till she dropped lifeless from exhaustion would be a far happier fate than to become Michael Clifford's wife while she still loved Reginald Bevington. She must love Reggy; she could not help it. She gave herself up to the thought of him, and when she reached her room she changed the dress she wore for that blue gown which suited her so well, and which he had liked to see her in. She had never worn it since his last visit, but now she put it on with a sort of despairing tenderness. Then she passed quietly down the stairs, out at the front door, and along the narrow alley that led to the orchard. The side window of her father's room looked this way, and instinctively Ruth glanced in that direction. His light was out and she sighed with relief, for she hoped he was asleep.

The orchard was bathed in moonlight, the foliage of the appletrees, as white as if the hoar frost lay on it, and the dark stems beneath shone a bluish silver where the light touched them; their quaint, gnarled arms looked goblin-shaped in the unwonted radiance—a cold weird radiance, that chilled while it fascinated the eye. Ruth was utterly heedless of observation as she made her way to the center of the orchard, to the spot where little more than a year ago her lover had made her confess that she loved him, and had held her in his arms.

“If I could have died then! If I could only have

died!" she moaned, as she leaned against the rough bark of an old tree, heedless of its rasping graze against her tender cheek; she enjoyed the painful feeling; it was in harmony with her thoughts. She would be sad to-night; there was no one to let or hinder. It could harm no one if she gave free course to her sorrow. Something seemed to warn her that her sorrow was rebellious. Something faintly whispered that if she tried to cast out the thought of her young lover her mind would be clearer as to what she ought to do; but she hardened herself resolutely, even against the feeling that she was going to do a wrong in marrying Michael Clifford. The whisper died away and she was left to herself. She told herself that after to-morrow she must always lead a life of formal duty, and that she had a right to give herself up to-night to the wild, passionate longings that racked her. She forgot alike place and time; she clasped her arms round the hoary trunk beside her, and wished that she could die. If she could only be lying beside her young mother in the church-yard!

When at last Ruth turned to leave the orchard the stars were fading out of sight; the moon had been some while ago hidden by a bank of threatening cloud. A pale glimmer in the east told her that morning was on its way, and that her wedding-day had dawned.

CHAPTER XXIII.

IT was evident on this 15th of July that Saint Swithin remembered his ancient grievance. Mrs. Bevington sat near the window of her drawing-room, and every now and then as she raised her eyes from the paper she was reading the sight that met them was that of a continued downpour, so violent that a series of small puddles were forming on the gravelled terrace below. It was an extraordinary change, for two days before, on Ruth Bryant's wedding morning, the sky had been a cloudless blue and the sunshine intense and scorching.

There was no one to see her, and Mrs. Bevington yawned from sheer weariness of the dreary outlook. She wondered whether any mother had ever been tried as she had been. A bad son, a profligate or a drunkard, a man who had got into a card scandal and had been sent to Coventry by society—these were cases that Mrs. Bevington had heard of; and she had always pitied the mothers of such sons, and had been pathetic over the sad mistakes which she considered they must have made in bringing up their black sheep. Her own case was so very different; she had taken all possible care, and her son was in her eyes almost perfect. If Reginald's father had not made the mistake of placing him with that farmer, without taking the trouble to ascertain whether the farmer had an attractive daughter, all would have gone as

his mother wished it to go, and by this time Reggy would have been the contented husband of Clara Stretton. Poor, dear Reggy had been so badly used, first by this designing farm-house beauty, who had evidently expected to marry him, and then by the Strettons, who had broken off his engagement to Clara when some gossip from Purley had reached them respecting his visits to Miss Bryant.

Reginald's carelessness had enabled Mrs. Bevington to read several of Ruth's letters, and the anxious mother plainly saw in them that the girl was either very designing or very innocent; she also saw that Ruth believed herself to be engaged to Reginald.

She sighed with relief as a tall, very stylish-looking woman came gliding into the room and sank into a luxurious chair beside her hostess. Mrs. Bevington looked sadly at the new-comer; she had few secrets that she did not share with this cousin; she knew that she could safely speak of her troubles to one who had before now confided to her safe-keeping some decidedly "risky" passages of her own life. Lady Emily Walton had married young, and she had had an unhappy married existence: she was now middle-aged and free, and for the first time since her widowhood she had come to stay at Bevington Manor-house.

She moved so well, the poise of her head was so perfect, that the mingled grace and dignity of her tall figure gave more pleasure to the observer than the contemplation of a mere pretty face would have given. She dressed well, too—just now in black, though without the show of deep mourning that might have been thought consistent with the loss of

a husband who had died rather less than a year ago. There was fashion enough in her dress to suit even an exacting person in such a matter, but it was fashion adapted to the person of the wearer, instead of the wearer being adapted to the rules of fashion. It must, however, be said that Lady Emily's figure, whether it were the product of Art or of Nature, set off everything she wore to the best advantage.

She had large and bright eyes—they were perhaps rather hard and audacious in expression; a mouth that looked as greedy as that of a fish, though her lips were still red and her teeth white; a large and singularly thin, aquiline nose, which seemed bent on acquiring. It was perhaps this acquisitive expression that prevented her from being handsome.

"Sighing again, Rosamond?" she wheeled herself nearer her cousin, her skirt falling in long, sweeping folds that would have delighted a figure-painter. "It is always the same tune that you sigh to—that naughty, darling boy?"

"In a way, yes; I was sighing about Reggy. I have just discovered a new feature in the case. You will say I ought to rejoice at it, but I am not sure. I want you to advise me what to do."

Lady Emily's face brightened. She had a real regard for her cousin, but when she promised to come to Bevington she by no means intended to be the only visitor at the manor-house. On her arrival she had been dismayed to find that Mr. Bevington was away yachting, and that no other guests were expected for a fortnight. She was, however, a thorough woman of the world, and, except toward her late husband, gifted with remarkable tact and good

temper. At the sight of Mrs. Bevington's disturbed face she took a cheerful, almost a jovial, tone, and patted her cousin's shoulder. There was something enlivening in the prospect of a new feature in what she named "Reggy's bewitchment."

"The first thing to be attended to, dear child, is your forehead. Lord! Rosamond, if you frown in that way when you are puzzled you will have wrinkles before you are a year older. Look at my forehead! I never allow anything to fret me seriously; life isn't worth it, dear. I want you to consider this little affair reasonably. You incline to treat it as an *affaire de cœur*; in my opinion it was merely the consequence of propinquity. A charming young fellow—for when he is in good spirits Reggy is very charming, even to a woman of my standing—Reggy then, finds himself in an out-of-the-way country place, with no one to talk to except an occasional plough-boy and the farmer who is his instructor in agricultural matters, and who probably discourses from morning till night on the respective merits of shorthorns and of southdown sheep. The unlucky pupil gets these subjects on his nerves; I fancy I can see the poor fellow yawning. All at once the much enduring and wholly bored youth finds out that a very handsome girl is living under the same roof. Their first meeting must have been a complete *coup de theatre*. Think how enchanted the girl must have been! Of course propinquity and opportunity did the rest. The only possible outcome of the situation was for the young fellow to fall in love; the girl, you may be sure, had already set him the example. You may trust me, Rosamond; I once wrote a

novel and regularly got up the subject of love. Bless you! I know all about it."

Mrs. Bevington gave a meaning smile.

"If Reggy were not my son, I suppose 'the bewitchment,' as you call it, would seem amusing to me. Now, I feel he was sinned against by being allowed to stay so long at Appledore."

"And it seems to me, on the contrary, that at his age it was a mistake to interfere at all. You were hardly so judicious as usual, perhaps, when you summoned the young fellow home in such a hurry. You simply precipitated matters. Probably if you had left them alone the love-making would have come to the father's knowledge, there would have been a scene and an explanation, the farmer would have seen that naturally Reggy did not mean marriage, and he would have kicked him out of the house. Some of that sort of people are strait-laced, you know, and they express their ideas rudely. An expulsion of that sort would have cured our fastidious Reggy, you may be sure; or else, and I believe this is more likely, the father would have kept his eyes shut, and in the end Reggy would have tired of his mistress. Friction of any sort always rekindles that sort of flame. I fear, from what you say, that Reggy still hankers after the girl."

"Just after his engagement to Clara, about a month ago, he went to see this Ruth Bryant." Mrs. Bevington sighed as she spoke. "That is the reason the Strettons give for breaking off the engagement. Mr. Stretton's gout makes him so very irritable, you see."

Her cousin laughed. "Everything comes right if

one knows how to wait. I had a letter from Geraldine Vavasour this morning, and she tells me she was at Stretton last Monday. Clara scarcely spoke, she says, and looked wretched. Leave Clara and her father alone, my dear, and she'll be only too happy to forgive her naughty boy when he gives up the farm beauty; you really think too much about such a trifle."

She leaned back in her easy-chair and yawned; she was far more distinguished-looking than Mrs. Bevington was, but far less punctilious, except when she was on parade. She yawned now till her mouth looked like a pike's, and she put up one shapely hand before it and intrepidly crossed her long legs. Then, all at once she remembered Mrs. Bevington's words, and she looked bright again.

"What did you say about a new feature in 'the bewitchment?' Please tell me! I am really interested about it all."

Mrs. Bevington glanced at the paper she had been reading.

"The girl's marriage is announced in the local papers," she said; "and there is a paragraph about the alarming illness of Mr. Bryant, the father, on the return of the wedding-party from church."

Lady Emily laughed.

"Capital!" she said; "I am so glad she's married—for your sake, I mean. I confess I had become interested in the little romance. Now, of course, it is over. Reggy will be disgusted at being set aside for some clod-hopper. He will be tiresome, of course; but you will know how to manage him—just a case for your judicious handling, Rosamond! My poor

husband used to say you were perfect at dotting your i's and crossing your t's."

Mrs. Bevington's face had cleared at the first part of her cousin's sentence. "I had not thought of it in that way; my fear was that as Reggy likes the father he would go over to inquire for him, and then he would see the girl. There is no mother, and this Ruth is said to be such a devoted daughter that of course she is at Appledore nursing him. I don't want Reggy to run the risk of seeing her."

"You forget the husband, the clod-hopper; surely he will be to the fore!"

"He is not a clod-hopper, Emily; he is a Mr. Clifford. I remember he lunched here some time ago. He is, I believe, looked up to in the county. He knows about land and that sort of thing—quite well to do, I should think."

Lady Emily sat upright and looked very cheerfully at her cousin.

"You need not worry yourself at all; this sort of man knows everything: middle-class people are always so clever, don't you know? The girl has married him because he is well-off and well-considered. For her own sake she will not do anything risky so soon after marriage. I really advise you to show Reggy that newspaper. Some kind friend is sure to tell him of the marriage. I find people so extremely considerate in that way." She checked a sigh, and then as she looked out of the window she said, "Here comes Reggy, streaming with water. I shall depart, so as not to meet him. I would as soon come in contact with Bruno after a swim in the Severn."

She left the room, smiling at the coming interview between mother and son; she felt sure that it would be stormy. Meanwhile Mrs. Bevington, with a lightened heart, began to consider how she could best tell Reginald that Ruth Bryant had become Mrs. Clifford.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE newspaper report was a true one. On his return from church Philip Bryant had suddenly turned giddy, and soon after a second stroke of paralysis had seized him. This time the doctor was not so hopeful of even partial recovery. The insensible man was laid on his bed, to all outward appearance dead; and Ruth, who had hastily changed her wedding-gown, took her place by his side.

Michael Clifford gave all necessary directions and then rode over to Purley to countermand orders and to order what was wanted in these changed circumstances. "Man proposes," he said to himself, not so bitterly now as when Dorothy's illness had summoned him away from Purley; he said it to-day with a sort of reverent fear. The shock had at first been very great, and the disappointment keen almost beyond bearing; but his ride gave him time for thought, and when he had executed his various commissions and had written certain necessary letters connected with this change of plans he felt calmer and more resigned.

He was almost tranquil as he rode back in the evening to Appledore. He grieved for Ruth's sorrow and for his friend, but the doctor told him that under any circumstances this must have come before long. Michael reminded himself how ardently he had wished, when he met Ruth on her return from New-bridge, that the marriage could be delayed, so that

he might have more chance of winning his wife's love beforehand. It seemed to him a selfish idea, and yet he knew that during the farmer's illness, and in the interval that must elapse before Ruth would be free to come and live with him at Purley, he should have far more opportunity of proving his devotion than he might have found in the little wedding holiday he had planned at the seaside. Ruth was his wife; he was therefore justified by duty, as well as by inclination, in making her claims on him paramount to those of any other person.

He did not believe his poor old friend would long survive this last shock. Michael shuddered as he remembered the scene. If he had not been standing near, Philip Bryant must have fallen on the stones that paved the porch. This was a sad beginning to his darling's new life, but he hoped that time would console her, and that little by little she would learn to care for his love, and at last would return it. Meantime he could not expect to come between her and her father.

He went into Appledore by the farm-yard; he did not wish to disturb his wife, and he wanted to speak to John Bird, who was to have been left in charge of the farmhouse and its accessories, conjointly with Mrs. Voce, till the arrival of the new tenants.

Bird was standing in the yard chewing a straw between his strong, white teeth. His luxuriant brown hair and beard shone ruddy in the warm sunlight, his rich brown eyes glowed with color; he looked the personification of happy leisure as he stood with the sleeves of his blue shirt partly rolled up and showing far more brawn on his arms than

his string-tied fustian trousers vouched for in respect of legs. He made a superb contrast to the tired, jaded looking man who came up to him.

Bird felt more awe for Mr. Clifford than he had ever felt for his master. He knew well enough that Mr. Bryant was willing to accept eye-service, and to take the will for the deed; while Bird had seen for himself that Mr. Clifford looked into the inside of everything, from the building of a rick to the cleanliness of a byre or a pig-stye. Bird and Sally Voce disagreed about Miss Ruth's husband, and Bird, who had promised himself at least a week of delightful idleness, was now half surly when Mr. Clifford spoke to him.

Michael was too much absorbed in his own thoughts to notice the man's manner.

"This is a sad ending to a wedding, Bird," he said, "but you will get some supper and a cake for the children. You will of course go on here as usual till Mrs. Clifford thinks it safe to move her father."

"Thank'ee, sir!"

Bird stood looking after him as he passed on to the house.

"Mrs. Clifford!" he gave a coarse laugh. "Him seems mighty pat wiv the new title. I'm thinkin' 'twad ha' ben different wiv t'other one. Miss Ruth ood ha' left her father for a day or so. Mrs. Woce and the doctor's enough for the poor chap till he comes to hisself, and that won't be just yet, the doctor told me so. I knows what I knows, an' if yon man," he nodded his head toward Michael, as he passed in by the door of the house-place, "I says, if yon man, as takes so much on hisself, if he cared as

he should care for Miss Ruth, like t'other one did, why he'd go in an' he'd take her right away, he would, till such time as the poor old master comes to; an' my missus is of the same mind as me, and that don't often happen, nayther."

Bird had that day drank Miss Bryant's health in so many mugs of ale that it may be fairly supposed he was not in need of any more, or of the plentiful supper which Ruth had provided, but which she had now sent word should be taken to the men's houses in place of the general meal she had planned, and which Mrs. Voce was to have presided over at the farmhouse. The loss of this convivial gathering had disappointed George Bird. "'Tis the jollity, not the drink, as I craves arter," he growled, as he chewed the golden straw blade.

Ruth met her husband at the door of the sick-room. She looked more cheerful than he expected, but she shook her head when he asked her if there was any decided improvement in her patient.

She led the way into the hall, leaving the door ajar behind her.

"Hardly," she said. "I hoped you would not have come back; it is so sadly dull for you. You see I dare not leave him; I have a feeling that consciousness will return more quickly this time, though Dr. Buchan did not seem to think so. I fancied just now that there was a slight movement in one of the eyelids. I must go back directly, please; but if you really mean to stay I will give orders to Sally and tell her so."

"Do you think I could leave you, my darling?"

He put his arm round her, and his passionate kiss

made Ruth shrink away from him with almost a shudder. For the time she had forgotten that he was her husband. "Do not trouble about anything, darling!" he said; "Mrs. Voce and I are old acquaintances. She will make it all right for me."

She did not ask him to come and look at her father and he did not intrude; something warned him that it was wiser not to assume any rights over his wife beyond the right of aiding and protecting her to the utmost of his power.

"I will come and see how he is before I turn in," he said cheerfully; "and darling, take all the rest you can; you will not be fit to go on nursing to-morrow unless you rest."

He said this so tenderly that she felt ashamed of her harsh, cold feelings toward him; she looked up with a smile.

"I promise you I will be careful," she said; "but I can rest better if I am left quite alone. I am not at all afraid, and if I want help I will call you."

She held out her hand, and he felt himself dismissed; he raised it to his lips, and so they parted.

CHAPTER XXV.

DR. BUCHAN'S brown, clean-shaved face looked almost handsome with pleasure as he fixed his sharp eyes on Ruth.

"I congratulate you on your nursing, Mrs. Clifford. I really did not expect your dear father to have made such a good recovery. If he goes on as he has begun, it will not be long before you can take him home with you to Purley."

Ruth had turned abruptly away from him; she did not want this keen observer to watch her face, she felt she was growing pale and faint when he would think she ought to smile, and yet, it was not possible that she could rejoice in hearing this opinion of her father's state.

"Do not let us move him too soon," she said. "I have sometimes thought that the idea of leaving Appledore was partly the cause of this last attack. I am sure he ought not to move till he wishes to do so."

The doctor bowed rather stiffly, she thought; she had turned to him again as she finished speaking.

"I do not presume to advise"—there was a vexed tone in his voice. "Perhaps I was considering the matter from my friend Clifford's point of view. He told me the incoming tenant was tired of waiting, and would 'cry off' if he was kept much longer from taking possession."

"I had not thought of that," the girl said frankly.

She liked Dr. Buchan, and his changed tone had pained her; but she could not set herself right in his opinion by affecting a wish to go to her husband's house.

When the dapper little man had taken leave Ruth stood thinking, her eyes bent on the flower-bed below the latticed casement. She had left her father in charge of Sally Voce, but he was awake, and she knew she should get no thinking-time when she rejoined him.

The doctor's words had given her a rude awakening. At first when her agony of alarm was quieted by the signs of her father's returning life she had told herself that this was a merciful reprieve, and she had tried to put the memory of her marriage in the background. Little by little she had succeeded in bringing back the barrier between herself and Michael Clifford which had so tormented him during their engagement. Lately, indeed, she had always rung for Sally Voce to open the door for him, so as to curtail as much as possible any affectionate leave-taking.

It had seemed to her that, although her father had recovered consciousness sooner than he had in the spring, he had less recuperative power, and that it might be long before he was able to leave his bed. More than one plan of freeing herself from her husband had passed through her brain, but her father required such constant attention that she had decided to watch and wait. A few days ago, however, Michael had made a suggestion that gave her a hope of escape.

One of his clients, he told her, was in treaty for a

large property in Burgundy, and had said that he could not decide on the purchase without Mr. Clifford's opinion. Michael told Ruth that but for her unwillingness to leave her father he should have enjoyed making the journey with her; he also said that the affair would be remunerative. The girl thought he had looked pained when she urged him to go alone, and he had turned away without giving her an answer. She was thinking of this as she stood looking at the flower border, where deep-tinted autumn blossoms had taken the place of paler petalled flowers. If Michael loved her, and she supposed he did, though certainly for some days past his manner had been cold and uncertain—still, if he loved her she must have some influence with him. Why then should she not use this influence, and persuade him to go away? She was still so honest that she flushed at the consciousness that this persuasion must necessarily be deceitful; but she could not help that. Her one overmastering idea was to free herself, to escape this daily visit, which was rapidly becoming intolerable to her. When Michael was safe in Burgundy, and she had no personal explanations to shrink from, she determined to write to him and tell him all the truth. She hoped that he would then voluntarily give her up. She would not allow herself to see that she might have made this appeal sooner. The very thought of his face stiffened into sternness by his contempt of her conduct had made a coward of the once brave girl.

The doctor's words had shown her she had no time to lose. She also knew that Clifford's client was urgent; she had only to persuade her husband to go

abroad without further delay, so that her father might be strong enough to leave Appledore when Michael came back from France. There could be no deceit, she thought, in keeping the doctor's opinion to herself.

Since his father-in-law had been pronounced better Michael had slept in Purley. Ruth's increasing hardness and avoidance made him too unhappy. He resolved to see as little of her as possible; for under present circumstances their intercourse had become painfully strained. He had lately come over to Appledore for an hour or so in the afternoon, when Ruth was likely to be out walking. To-day her reverie after the doctor's visit had delayed her, and she was going out of the gate when Cilfford rode down the lane.

He got off his horse and walked beside her.

"Don't let me stop your walk," he said; for in pursuance of her plan she had turned to go in-doors; "I want to see your father. I met Buchan; he gives a very good report indeed."

"I fancy Dr. Buchan speaks as he wishes," she said coldly. "I am sure my father is not fit to be moved."

He looked searchingly at her, but she would not even smile. He thought he had never seen her look so hard. She was really angry with herself, for she knew that this was not the way to influence Michael; and yet if she smiled he might altogether mistake her meaning.

"Good-by, for the present," he said gravely. "Go and take your walk. I will talk to you when you come in; I will stay a little later on purpose."

Instead of turning away, to his surprise she put her hand lightly on his arm. The touch thrilled him with a feeling of yearning tenderness. Had he been mistaken, and was her reserve with him only the shyness natural in the unusual state in which she found herself? But he had received too many rebuffs from her of late to be completely reassured by this advance, and as he listened he congratulated himself on his reticence.

“I want to talk to you.” Her voice sounded timid, and he thought her smile was forced; it wanted the lovely glow he so well remembered. “I was thinking, Is not this a good time for you to take that French journey you talked of? You could leave us now without any anxiety, and my father would be able to move by the time you came back. It would”—she began to stammer—“it would shorten the waiting for you.”

When she had ended her eyes fell under his, and still clinging almost desperately to his new theory of her extreme timidity he gently took her hand and pressed it.

“I will think it over, Sweetheart,” he said. “When you come back you shall find that I have settled everything with your father, and then if you don’t approve we must alter plans to please you. Is my darling satisfied?”

She nodded and turned quickly away; the fondness of his tone had irritated her, and she could hardly help frowning. He, on the contrary, stood looking after her in a blissful state of surprise at his own blindness. He waited, looking after her till she was out of sight before he went in to see Philip Bryant.

Michael warmly congratulated the invalid on the report of the doctor.

"I fancy before long," he said, "I shall be welcoming you to Purley."

Bryant shook his head wearily. "The doctor may be right, Michael, but I am sadly weak. I feel as if any change would be too much for me. So short a time as I have left, too! At my age it seems a pity——" He stopped, with an imploring look at his companion.

Michael understood, but he thought this putting off might go on for months; he thought, too, that his friend would certainly be benefited by the change, if he could only bring himself to consent to the wrench of leaving his old home. It was difficult to avoid wounding him, yet Clifford knew there was no one else who could really influence Philip Bryant on this subject as well as he could.

"The difficulty is," he said, "whether we can get that fellow Chapman to wait. He grumbles at the delay; but that does not signify, after all, if you are not up to making the change."

Bryant was lying outside his bed, propped up by pillows; his head sank back among them, and he was silent a few minutes.

"Do you mean," he said very sadly, "that my illness will have lost you the tenant you had found for Appledore?"

Clifford smiled, and tried to speak reassuringly.

"He wants a little smoothing down, I fancy. Perhaps if I could fix a definite time he would wait; but any way, dear old fellow, you must not worry about it. I shall probably find some one else, or fail-

ing that I may come to some arrangement with your landlord; you must leave that to me. You know," he added, with a bright smile, "I consider you my client in this matter."

Bryant raised his head and looked at him earnestly.

"I know one thing," he said, "and that is that you are the best friend a ruined man ever had; and I pray that God may bless you for your goodness. I will not be a hindrance to you, Michael; you ought long ago to have taken your wife home. Hardly any other man would have spared her so long. Why, you might have left me with a nurse, and I could not have had a word against it!"

He paused, and a look of weariness showed in his eyes.

"You must not talk any more just now," Michael said. "You and Ruth shall settle it when you are able; you shall not be hurried, let the doctor say what he will!"

Bryant was looking anxious.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE dreaded dull fortnight was over at the manor-house. Mr. Bevington had come back, and the house was full of visitors. Lady Emily was radiant, the life of the party, in spite of the youth and extreme attractiveness of two of the other ladies.

To-night, when Mrs. Bevington was having a confidential chat with her cousin in Lady Emily's room, she complimented her on this subject.

"I am so sorry you talk of leaving," she said. "We shall all miss you dreadfully. As to Reggy, I do not see who there will be left for him to talk to. He says you are delightful; you have no caprices, and you are so sympathetic."

Lady Emily, who had risen to put back a miniature she had been examining, made her cousin a low courtesy.

"I feel honored, but do you think I am a wholesome taste for Reggy, Rosamond? If you want him later on to appreciate Clara Stretton you should get him to cultivate Georgina Sneyd or Mrs. Courthope; they are both so handsome, and, what is also to the point, so extremely correct."

"He says they don't amuse him. Don't you think all men, old or young, like amusement when they can get it?"

"Of course they do! The poor things depend on us. By the way, is it not a mistake to ask such a

beautiful creature as Mrs. Courthope on a visit with her husband?"

"I do not see how I could help myself; they have only been married a year."

Lady Emily shook her head at her cousin.

"You are so clever, Rosamond, that you know perfectly well how to make use of opportunities. You might have waited to ask them till it was close on the 12th. I find that the husband is devoted to grouse-shooting. Can you not persuade her to stay on? Reggy will find her a far more lively companion when the husband is off guard."

Mrs. Bevington tried to look grave; she ended by smiling.

"Georgina Sneyd has asked to stay on a week by herself," she said, "but she and her husband are still such lovers that she will be probably even less amusing in his absence than she is now."

Her cousin laughed.

"Remember, dear, the old motto scratched by a king on a pane of glass," she said gayly. "My experience tells me that women vary according to circumstances. I try to keep Reggy amused to prevent him from maundering about his Dulcinea. He has looked dolefully dismal ever since he heard of the marriage. My only wonder is that he has not gone off to see her. If you want to prevent this, get rid of the honorable Mostyn Courthope for a week or so. I promise you that Reggy will quickly console himself for my desertion. The farmer's daughter cannot be so lovely as this young creature is, and how exquisitely she dresses, or I should say is dressed; for that French maid of hers is the deftest, cleverest

looking woman I have seen for many a day. I should try to get her, but I could not hope to top Mrs. Court-hope's wages. Poor child! how can she help being dull? She must have found out long ago that her husband is made of money and nothing else."

"Has there been any talk between you and Reggy about that affair?"

"No," her cousin said dryly, "and yet I assure you I have tried to sound him. He seems to shy like a nervous horse when we get near the subject. At dinner to-day he said something, however, that made me hopeful. If you can manage to pair him off with me to-morrow, I think the ice may be finally broken between us."

"Do try, dear!" Mrs. Bevington kissed her affectionately. "You can say so much more than I can, because you are not his mother, and because you have not any sore feeling on the subject. I envy you your excellent temper, Emily; you never seem to take anything to heart."

"I am a philosopher," her cousin answered; "not about heat or cold or discomfort; those are things which I do not choose to bear, so I take means to avoid them. I never, as you know, winter in England, but I take good care to be provided with English comforts abroad. As a philosopher, I see that I cannot rule the universe, and I should be very sorry if I had the trouble of doing so. I accept things as they come, and get the best out of everything."

Mrs. Bevington was looking pensive.

"I am trying to see," she said, "how your philosophy would have helped you in this affair of Reggy's, supposing you had been his mother?"

Lady Emily held up both her long, slender hands.

"Heaven forbid such a position, my dear Rosamond! The one accident of my life for which I thank Providence is that I have been spared the torment of a child. No philosophy can cope with the chaos a child creates in its mother's peace. A child makes life from its first beginning a continued pain. You know it does, though you would never own it."

"Ah! but, my dear, you leave out the compensations."

"What are they? A few baby kisses, perhaps a few school or college successes, though these are safe to be blotted out by the bills you are called on to pay for your son's extravagances. After that your life is a continual martyrdom; you are reduced to the condition of a shuttlecock between son and husband, even when your son is as well-behaved and nice as Reggy is; and daughters are worse—there is so much more daily friction. No, to the last day of my life I shall continue to thank Heaven that it has spared me such a domestic infliction as a child."

Mrs. Bevington knew that she was no match for her cousin when Lady Emily aired a theory; she had a way of giving her ideas vent as they came—just to hear how they sounded—though at the moment she believed herself to be in earnest. Her cousin therefore bent her head silently, and made no effort to contradict her.

"If I cannot persuade you to stay," she said gently, "I wish you could persuade Reggy to go with the other men to Scotland; it would give him a change of scene and of ideas, and—and it would take

him out of Marchshire. Now his father is at home I can do without him."

She spoke sorrowfully, and her cousin knew how happy her son's mere presence made this devoted mother.

"I will try," Lady Emily said, "but I am not hopeful of success. I am not quite sure that it would not be better to let Reggy cure himself in his own way. Well, good-night, dear! It is unconscionably late, and you ought to be in bed."

When her cousin had left her, Lady Emily laughed. It seemed to her that far too much fuss had been made about Reggy's fancy. It would be better for him to end it his own way. If he were to go and see the newly-married Dulcinea she might perhaps snub him, and so effectually cool his ardor; or, again, she might listen to him and allow him to visit her, in which case the husband would probably horsewhip him; either way would settle what was a very natural fancy on the young fellow's part, but as the affair evidently worried his mother, the sooner a cure could be found for it the better, for the sake of her cousin's peace.

"If I had fully appreciated the comfort of peace in poor Walton's time," his widow thought, as her maid brushed her long hair, plentifully streaked with gray, "we should both have led easier lives. Peace is worth having at any price."

An excursion had been planned to visit the ruins of a famous abbey, and the weather next day was so bright and beautiful that at breakfast the expedition was decided on.

Mrs. Bevington and three of her guests were to drive ; the gentlemen agreed to walk, for the sake of a celebrated view from the ridge of lofty downs above the road.

Lady Emily was proud of her walking powers, and she and Reggy soon paired off and allowed the others to precede them.

"This is our last walk," she said. "I am really sorry to go."

"Are you?" he stared at her in surprise. "It is nice of you to say so. My wonder is that you have managed to stay so long in such a dull hole as Bevington. I, for one, have sometimes felt inclined to put an end to myself more than once this year."

"You, my dear fellow! I should have thought you a very happy-minded person."

"You are chaffing; you know better than that. Just consider the vexing things that have happened to me this year!"

"You mean your godfather's marriage? Yes, that was a disappointment; but, Reggy, such a man as you are can always mend his fortunes by marriage—that is, if he wishes to do so."

He looked keenly at her. "Surely you know that I was engaged, and that it is broken off?"

"I heard something of the sort, and it puzzled me. I fancied you must know that if you choose to persevere no girl of taste will persist in refusing to be your wife. Perhaps you were not devoted enough to your *fiancée*. Was that it?"

The path along which they walked on the top of the wooded ridge was bordered on either side by tall

grasses, and the young man flicked these angrily with his stick, though at his companion's first words he had flushed with pleasure.

"I dare say I seemed cold; I am not fond of shamming. That's why I will not go up to the moors with Mostyn Courthope; I can't stand the fellow, and he would soon spot it if we were all day together."

Lady Emily waited a few minutes; then she said, "Why could you not devote yourself to Miss Stretton? Don't think me impertinent, my dear fellow! You see, I have known you so long that I take liberties."

His small, bright eyes narrowed to mere slits as he looked at her.

"You want me to be frank with you," he said, "and yet you are not frank with me. You know why I could not get fond of Clara."

She looked fully at him; there was a touch of womanly dignity in her tone as she answered:

"I hoped we were real friends. I care so much for you, Reggy, that I put full trust in you. For instance, just now you said that your reason for not going to the moors is that you dislike your proposed companion" [he winced under her steady gaze], "and I implicitly believed you. Your mother perhaps tells me more than she tells others, but she is extremely reticent. There was a certain marriage announced in a local paper, and I gathered from her that you knew the Miss—Miss, what was her name that was married?"

"Miss Bryant," he said sternly, "the most beautiful creature a man ever loved; and understand me, cousin, she is as good as she is beautiful."

Lady Emily's face never showed any emotion, unless indeed she was seriously displeased; but the young fellow felt that his assurance was needful. He knew by a kind of instinct that his companion would be disposed to speak slightly of Ruth.

"Ah!" she said, "those country girls often have wonderful complexions."

"I tell you she is thoroughly beautiful; she would be considered a beauty even in London. She's the best girl a man could find. If I had been a free man I would have married her."

"Really! I suppose there is no saying how much education and association and all that sort of thing will do for a girl. I should like to have seen your Ruth," she said in an interested tone.

"Would you?" his eyes sparkled. "If I could only have known that when you first came here it might have been possible to take you over to Appledore. Now it is too late: she has married a man she does not care for, just for her father's sake;" he gave a sort of groan and relapsed into silence. His cousin walked on beside him, outwardly grave, but secretly delighted with his confidence.

"Poor dear Reggy!" she said in a low voice; "I wish I had known sooner!"

"And I wish," he burst out impetuously, "that my mother were more like you. I don't want to find fault with my mother—she is admirable; but on this point she is entirely out of sympathy with my feelings. I believe she thinks Miss Bryant's marriage a Godsend, judging by the way she told me of it."

Another pause; then Lady Emily said very softly:

"I have been thinking, Reggy, perhaps I hardly

understand; but is your position altered by this marriage? If you felt that you were unable to marry her, and you think that she still loves you better than she loves her husband, it seems to me that the situation remains really the same. I should say that a married woman who no longer cares for her husband is easier to win than an unmarried girl is. Ah! look, Reggy; that is surely your father beckoning to us."

Reggy looked, but he could only see a stalwart countryman coming toward them—a man half as big again as the owner of Bevington Manor. But the young fellow took his companion's hint and walked faster. He wanted to join the others, so that he might get away by himself and think over Lady Emily's words.

"Look!" she said presently; "I told you they would be waiting for us."

Mr. Bevington and his companions were now in sight, but they did not seem to be impatient; they were all smoking. Two of them sat on a felled tree-trunk; the others were leaning against a five-barred gate. The top of the ridge was bare, and the eye commanded from this spot a far-stretching view of hill and dale, of green hills, sometimes purple with ling, sometimes golden with gorse blossoms; these were varied by a harsher prospect of rugged limestone crags, showing bare gray shoulders through a sparse covering of turf. There were valleys, too, their course indicated by a veil of blue mist which hinted the presence of a brook or rivulet below. On some of the hills the dull green of August foliage was contrasted by the rich and bluer tint of the pines. Here and there, sometimes rather near, but

more often in extreme distance, a long-sighted observer could trace blots, brown and red and white blots, that told of villages and townships far away. There rested over one of these blots a gray cloud, and as Reggy and his companion came up Mr. Mostyn Courthope took his cigar from between his lips and said:

“Do you see that smoke yonder? That’s Purley.”

Lady Emily looked quickly at her companion; he had turned away. Mr. Sneyd offered Lady Emily a cigarette, and she began to smoke with the others, seating herself on the felled trunk.

“This sort of thing does one good,” she said; “the air is magnificent up here.”

Reginald Bevington had gone on away from every one; he felt utterly miserable, as he looked at the gray, far-off blur and pictured to himself that Ruth probably was sorrowing at this moment in her Purley home over her love for him, and was longing for his presence.

Why did he not go and see her? She was married, but he was far more her friend than her husband was. If he had married Clara Stretton he should not have given up Ruth. Why, then, need she give him up because she had been forced by circumstances to marry a man she did not love? Lady Emily’s words had opened his eyes to his own faint-heartedness.

His mother had shown him the paper with the marriage in it, and there had been a painful scene between them. He had left her angrily, telling her that she had spoiled the happiness of his life, and since then the mother and son had scarcely spoken.

Reginald felt unhappy, and he knew that his mother was wretched; but he could not set matters straight. He knew she wanted him to say he had given up his love for Ruth. He had been very sullen and very miserable, but till to-day he had not had any definite hope or plan for the future. Ruth was so good, so high-minded, he dared not risk offending her when he remembered how she had looked when they last parted. But now Lady Emily's words had enlightened him. A clever woman was safe to understand other women better than a man could. He saw that Ruth was now no longer a timid, scrupulous girl: she was a woman who had become the wife of one man while she still loved another; and as he called up the looks that had assured him of her love, he felt a longing to fly then and there over the wide vista of hill and dale, of wood and stream, that divided them, and clasp his darling to his heart.

The sound of voices behind came as a warning that his companions were again on their feet; it brought back, too, the trammels in which he lived, and made him conscious of a sudden shock.

He told himself he could not injure Ruth; he loved her too dearly. He hated and despised Michael Clifford, who must surely have guessed the truth about his wife; yet when he thought of Ruth as she might have been in the midst of debt and poverty, he rejoiced that she was safe from the consequences of her father's troubles. He dared not tempt her to give up her position for his sake, and therefore he had better not try to see her. The resolution did him good: by the time they reached the ruins he had recovered himself. He went up to his mother and

talked to her, and put her into the carriage when it was time to start homeward; and in the walk home he was as gay as Lady Emily herself. He told himself he should not forecast. Who could say what life held for him? It was better to drift along with the tide and see what happened.

Going home they walked across the downs six abreast, taking a shorter way than that by which they had come. The young man's change of manner had made his cousin curious, but he did not give her a chance of asking him questions. At parting next day she kept his hand a moment in hers, when he had put her in the carriage which was to drive her to the great house she was going to visit.

"Write to me, Reggy," she said affectionately, as she fixed her fine eyes on his. "I am impatient to hear that you have seen your beautiful Ruth. You certainly ought to make sure that she is happy, or she will not consider you a true friend. Good-by!"

"All right!" he said. "Good-by!"

She kissed her fingers to him and then leaned back in the carriage as it rolled away and laughed softly to herself.

"There's no danger in giving such advice to him; he is far too great a muff to venture on making love to a married woman. Perhaps under his mother's wing he may do a little decorous flirtation with that lovely Mary Courthope. As to the farmer's daughter, he knows it was only my joke."

CHAPTER XXVII.

It seemed to Ruth as she went up the lane that Michael was disposed to listen to her suggestion about the journey to France. She had only to persevere and she should persuade him to go. She therefore shortened her walk, and gave up the visit she had meant to pay Lucy Voce and little George. The boy's quaint, childish talk was always an amusement to her, even in these sad days; but she was impatient to return to the charge, and she saw that she could not get back to Appledore in time for a talk with Michael if she went on to Little Marshfield.

Her determination to succeed had recalled her old daring, and she looked singularly cheerful on her return when she approached the gate.

Michael heard the click as she raised the latch; he came out to meet her.

"You see I have not been long," she said; she passed him and went into the parlor. Her heart beat a little more quickly when looking at him; she saw what she called his sentimental expression in his eyes, but she did not give him time for any loving words.

"Have you been thinking over your journey?" she said abruptly, and then, smiling: "It seems such a good time for you to go now, does it not?"

She stood facing him, and she felt that he had come closer to her while she spoke. Now he sud-

denly, and she thought masterfully, took both her hands.

"I have a better plan than that, my darling. Your father is willing to move whenever we wish, so that you and I have only to fix the day for your coming home to me, my own precious wife." He pressed her hands warmly, while Ruth felt every moment more cold and trembling, as she stood like a statue, unable to move or even to look up.

"Sit down, darling," he said. "What a stupid fellow I am, to keep you standing after your walk!" Then, as he placed himself beside her on the sofa and slipped his arm round her waist, he murmured in a low tone: "I suppose I can hardly think, I am so happy. It is such a joy, my sweet girl, to think of your being so soon at Purley."

She did not draw herself away; she was nerving herself for one more effort.

"I really don't think father knows how weak he is, but I know," she said earnestly. "To move him now may undo all that he has gained; it would be wrong and selfish to run such a risk."

If she could have looked into his eyes and smiled at him perhaps he might have yielded; but her strained manner, her nervous shrinking from his arm, which still lay round her waist, opened Michael's eyes to a glimpse of the truth. There seemed to him something behind her words—something more like aversion than the blushing, modest timidity he had fondly pictured while he waited for her; her attitude was hard and unloving, and the hardness seemed every moment to increase.

It was increasing. Ruth saw as in a flash that

she had been of set purpose trying to act a lie, so that she might free herself from her most unwelcome husband. As she saw it she suddenly flung her purpose from her; she could not revert to the subject of the French journey; that was only a pitiful subterfuge.

Michael took his arm away; rising, he stood before her. She dared not look up, but she longed to know whether he was angry with her.

"To-day is Monday," he said in a dull, level tone, as if only the matter in hand was in his mind; "I gathered from the doctor that your father might be safely moved next Thursday. Will that day suit your arrangements?"

She looked up now. He thought her eyes had a wild expression as they strayed round the room. He waited for her to speak; then, as her silence continued, a frown settled on his face.

"As to that journey to France," he said in a hard voice, "there is no use in proposing it to me. Is it likely that I could desert you in that way?"

Her lip quivered, but she did not speak. Michael left her and walked away. Such a storm of anger had mastered him that he was ashamed of his own feelings. He reminded himself, however, that he had promised Philip Bryant to settle the time for leaving Appledore.

"Shall we say Thursday, or will you leave it till next week? Your father said the sooner the better, and Dr. Buchan used almost the same words as we parted."

The strain had become too intense; it suddenly snapped. Ruth felt desperate and reckless; this was her last chance of escape.

She rose and looked at Michael; she flung away any attempt at deceit; she had suddenly become bold and careless as to what he might think, though she knew that what she had to say must irritate him beyond endurance.

"You want us to leave Appledore because of the new tenant. Well, then, we can go any day you like; but not to Purley. You must not ask me to live there with you; I cannot do it; I will not."

He stepped forward and grasped her arm.

"What do you mean?" he said sternly. "You will not? You are my wife. What do you mean, Ruth?"

No one had ever spoken to Ruth in so masterful a tone; it roused her spirit to yet more active rebellion. She raised her head and returned his stern look, but she was far more composed than he was; she had already gone through this scene in anticipation, while he was taken by surprise.

"I mean," she said slowly, but with cold decision, "that I cannot do my duty as your wife; that I have no love to give you." She paused; she wanted him to question her, but her manner had filled him with horror; he hung breathlessly on her words.

The silence continued till her longing for freedom overcame all scruples, all thought for any feeling besides her own.

"I cannot go with you," she said in a high, stubborn tone; "I love another man."

When she had said it her courage left her; she looked at him in terror. He remained silent; her words did not seem to affect him; he was really stupefied. He had not at first believed that she was

speaking the truth. He could not believe that this candid, upright girl, on whose honor he would have wagered his own, could have spread such a snare for him.

At last he said hoarsely:

"Are you in earnest? My God! if you are, you are as bad a woman as I have ever known. Are you in earnest? Answer me!" he said fiercely.

She bent her head, but she could not steady her voice to speak.

"Why have I not heard this before?" he went on. "How dared you marry me? How dared you swear before God to be my true and loving wife, when you knew it was a black falsehood? What had I done to you, Ruth" [his tone softened for a moment], "that you should wrong me like this? Why did you not tell me this wretched story at starting?"

Standing there, her eyes bent on the ground, she had been asking herself the same question. Now, as she looked up and saw the honest dignity that dominated the pain in his face, a strange revulsion passed over Ruth. She and Michael seemed to change places; it was she who had injured him. She had cheated him; she had even lied to gain her ends.

She longed to kneel down and ask his forgiveness, but her shame was too great.

He kept himself from looking at her.

"You can at least explain," he said.

"I have no excuse to offer," she said humbly. "I have no hope that this other person, that Mr. Bevington will ever think of me again. It has been all my own fault." She paused, then she added: "It

would have been worse to let you go on thinking I had any love to give you."

He was too angry to be touched by her submission; perhaps, for the time, his anger deepened because he could not wreak it on her, when she owned her conduct to be without excuse. She did not ask to be forgiven; she felt herself to be too guilty. She only longed to get away and hide herself from Michael's contempt. She stood before him with bent head and clasped hands, waiting for his decision.

"I cannot talk to you now; I must think." Then, as an afterthought came to him, he added, "As I am married to you there are one or two questions I had better ask at once." He spoke with such stinging bitterness that she clasped her hands together with a look of keen suffering. "Was there ever any engagement between you and this—this—gentleman, as you, I presume, call him? I call him a scoundrel."

"I thought I was engaged to him; we wrote to one another as if we were engaged, and he came three times to see me, that was all." Her calmness surprised him as she began, but Ruth felt as if she were talking of some one else, the Ruth who had met Reginald Bevington in the Mill Glen was so far away from her guilty self. Her last words brought back her companion's sternness.

"All!" he muttered between his clenched teeth. He waited a minute, then, "May I ask you how this intercourse was broken off?" His face darkened. "Has he seen you since you accepted my proposal?"

She raised her head with a momentary return of self-respect.

"I am not so bad as you think," she said. "The

last time he came I—I saw he did not mean to marry me, and I said he must not see me again. It is better that we should never meet, but—but—” [she covered her face with her hands], “I can’t forget him; I cannot,” she sobbed.

Michael longed to be face to face with Bevington, and to horsewhip him as long as he could stand over him. He turned his back on Ruth. She was, he believed, innocent; but it outraged him to see her crying for a man who would have ruined her if he had had the chance; for that was what was meant, he thought. He walked up and down the long room, trying to calm himself, while Ruth stood where he had left her. She felt bound to stay there till she learned whether she was free, or what was going to happen. After a while he stood still, but he did not go near her.

“I will see you to-morrow, if I can,” he said; “if not to-morrow, next day. I must plan out what is to be done; but mind this, not a word of it to your father. I shall plan it so that it will seem to be my doing, not yours.” He stopped, then he went on more harshly: “It will not be seeming, either; it is my doing. You had a strange opinion of me if you thought I would take for my wife a girl who belongs to another man.”

She felt that he was unjust; she had said that all was over between her and Mr. Bevington; but she knew she had so wronged Michael Clifford that she was willing to let him say anything he chose. She had fully deserved his contempt.

He paused when he reached the door, turned round and looked at her.

“It beats belief,” he seemed to be talking to himself, “that a creature can look so pure, so true, and yet be so deceitful. You have ruined both our lives, but I will not have your poor father made more unhappy than he must be at leaving his old home. He shall not be told the truth. You can say to him that no time is yet settled between us for leaving this place.”

He bent his head and went out of the room, without any further leave-taking.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

IT was fortunate for Michael Clifford that he had much practical work to accomplish in a short time. He had small opportunity for the consideration of his own feelings. Indeed, had this not been so, Michael would have turned from contemplating them; his nature was too strong for indulgence in self-pity. The only indulgence of feeling he now permitted himself was an intense indignation against young Bevington and against Ruth.

With his usual prompt decision he settled on a plan which would separate him from his wife and yet avoid any open scandal. Ruth and her father should go quietly to the little seaside place where the honeymoon was to have begun, and he should account for her absence from Purley by the fact of building a couple of additional rooms to his house in Broad Street. He had wished to do this before he married, but the shortness of his engagement had made it impracticable. The house was so old that this addition of new brickwork would probably occasion unlooked for and lengthy repairs to the original fabric—the longer the better, he thought, for him and for his shattered hopes. He should not be much in Purley, but he settled that his office should not be interfered with. There were several distant journeys he had from time to time been asked to take, among them the talked of expedition to Burgundy—singu-

larly distasteful now, because it called up a memory of Ruth's deceit.

He thought, however, that it would be a good beginning, and the fact of his taking so long a journey would account for his leaving his wife and her father to establish themselves by the seaside. Michael Clifford did not really value public opinion, but he had lived the greater part of his life in a small country town, and he was therefore well aware of the ravening appetite for gossip in the provincial mind. He despised it; he had often told his sister when they two were safe from eaves-droppers that the Purley people likened themselves to pigs by the greediness of their curiosity concerning their neighbors' affairs. But in spite of his contempt for this mindless folly, he would not yield a shred of the tragedy that had developed in the place of his own expected happiness to the tender mercies of his fellow town-folk. He would not even trust Dr. Buchan, but gravely consulted him about the suitability of Dolmouth as a temporary home for Mr. Bryant till the house in Broad Street should be again fit for habitation.

Dr. Buchan looked inquisitive, but Michael's steady gaze overawed even his coolness. The doctor tried to point out that Mrs. Voce could have taken care of Mr. Bryant while Ruth accompanied her husband on the various journeys he had spoken of.

"I thought you told me, Doctor," Michael said gravely, "that my dear old friend has at longest only a few months before him, unless indeed he should gain a great deal more strength before winter?"

Dr. Buchan bent his head.

"That is my opinion, my deliberate opinion," he said pompously; "but, my dear sir, I may err. We are all liable to error. Still, I ask myself how will it be with your wife? I understand and respect your wish not to part her from her father, but how will it be should her father be taken from her during your absence on one of these distant journeys—you—you contemplate?"

Having said this with more than ordinary pomposity, the doctor raised his eyebrows, gave his short nose an upward tilt and pinched up his lips till they looked like a red screw-hole.

Clifford gave a wary smile; he admired the doctor's tenacity, but he did not intend to reward it. He excused it, however, on the ground that every doctor has certain patients to whom a highly-spiced bit of news is far more welcome than a prescription.

"I shall take care to provide against such a mischance. Supposing that I am out of England, which I hope may not be the case, I shall arrange for my sister to come and stay with my wife at Dolmouth, or if this house should be finished they will come here."

This apparent frankness quieted the doctor's suspicions, and as he recalled the conversation on his way to see another patient he fancied that he himself had suggested Dolmouth as beneficial to Philip Bryant, and also as a desirable seclusion for so young and beautiful a wife in the absence of her husband.

Michael had resolved not to confide his terrible secret to any one, and he therefore meant to write his instructions instead of going to Scotland to see Dorothy. He could easily baffle ordinary curiosity,

but he shrank from meeting his sister's keen eyes; he knew that he could not hide his sorrow from her sympathetic insight. He remembered her warning; and at the time he had thought her jealous and prejudiced, and had fancied himself wise! Yesterday he resolved before he had ridden a mile from Appledore that he would not see Ruth again. It was useless, he thought, to expose himself to such a trial; the very sight of her would rob him of all self-control. He should probably reproach her; he should certainly feel vehemently angry. In some ways, too, it might be better not to see Philip Bryant; he might suspect that all was not quite as it was said to be. In every way it was better to write.

"Letter-writing is a blessed invention," he said sadly; "it so helps to soften much that would sound very cruel if it had to be spoken."

But while he thought this, his lip curled at his own weakness; he knew that his just anger against his wife burned as strongly as ever. Why, then, did he wish to spare her any of the trial she had brought on herself? He could not answer the question; he could only tell himself that it was better to keep away from Appledore. This want of directness was so entirely foreign to his nature that he only became still more restless and dissatisfied. He wrote both to Ruth and to Philip Bryant, and went out himself to post the letters. Then he sent for the best builder in Purley, went over the house with him, listened to his opinion and gave his instructions that all should be done as well and thoroughly as possible. He did not urge speed; he did not even name a date by which he wished the alterations to be completed.

The next day found him at Dolmouth; he wished to make sure that the lodgings he had chosen for the summer would be suited to an invalid when winter came. As yet Michael did not attempt to look forward; he so recoiled from the idea of having to spend his life with a woman who did not love him—a woman who had simply used him as a means of securing a home for herself and for her father—that he found it impossible to look forward to a time when he might be called on to receive his wife in the old house in Broad Street.

The owner of the Dolmouth lodging, Mrs. Rimell, was a woman of forbidding appearance; her pale, sallow skin, seamed with wrinkles, was not beautified by the contrast afforded by her cap—a bit of real old lace, much blued in the washing, and surmounted by a bow and ends of violet satin ribbon. Two long lace cap-strings hung down in front on either side of a lean and very ugly throat. Her eyebrows, still brown, were drawn together in such a decided frown that Clifford thought she must be angry, while the poor woman was only so nervously conscious of her plainness and awkwardness that she longed to run away and hide herself. There was, however, a sour expression on her pale, flabby lips that indicated a dissatisfaction with the world in general, but which to a stranger seemed to be of special application. She said, however, that the gentleman was welcome to come in and see her cottage, and Michael thought her manner of speaking was more educated than either her appearance or her way of receiving an expected visitor. Before he left the cottage he had decided that the rooms were thoroughly satisfactory,

and that Mrs. Rimell was both honest and kind, though probably, he surmised, not especially easy to live with.

He shrugged his shoulders as this thought came on his way back to the station. He knew that strangers always liked Philip Bryant; his manner was so extremely winning. As for Ruth, well, he had resolved as far as possible to banish her from his thoughts; it was therefore useless to assure himself that she was certain to fascinate the sour-looking lady.

He went home and wrote to Dorothy, and he bade her answer his letter in Paris. He said he should have left home before she received it.

Then he made out a list of things to be sent to Dolmouth. He copied this list and sent the duplicate to Ruth, with formal but minute instructions for her journey. He had already put all business relating to Appledore in charge of his friend Wood, the only witness of his ill-starred wedding.

There still remained much to be done, but he went on from one thing to another with a determination and a thoroughness that would not allow bodily and mental fatigue a moment's indulgence. At last all was done, and he felt free to start on his journey.

He waited, however, till he heard from Ruth that she and her father were safe at Dolmouth. Her letter was as short and formal as his had been, but it expressed the writer's thanks for the kind care he had taken for her comfort and for that of her father. Michael sighed with relief as he read; a load seemed lifted from his spirits.

"Thank God," he said; "I am once more free!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

It was ebb-tide. The sea had gone out as far as possible from the semicircle of shingle that made a little bay, and it now lay as if sulking, in a long, gray, foam-specked roller, over which at intervals a solitary white gull darted and sometimes seemed to dip the point of its wing in the water. Behind the sullen gray sea was a mass of clouds, of which the dark lead-colored centre bulged forward, and seemed ready presently to burst over the dull expanse of sand stretched out between the sea and the semicircle of shingled beach. This shelved in three distinct terraces or steps up to a wind-swept meadow. Across this meadow a sandy path led to the back of Mrs. Rimell's cottage.

The gate of the little garden, set in a hedge of tamarisk bushes, led on to the meadow; and Ruth could spend as much time as she chose beside the sea, without attracting notice by having to pass through the village. Bathing was over at Dolmouth. There was a much larger and wider sea-front at the end of two straggling lines of cottages that constituted the village, where boats were drawn up on the beach and fishermen in oilskin hats and blue jerseys loafed in the sunshine. There was only one set of lodgings in the place besides Ruth's cottage, and these others had been let and vacated early in the season. No fear of an intruder on her favorite haunt

disturbed Ruth as she sat on the lowest of the shelves, her feet resting on the sand that mingled with fine gravel, screened by constant friction of the water from the coarse shingle on which she sat. Her rich brown hair was blown out of its sculpturesque waves by the wind, which had brought color to her cheeks and a yet deeper glow than usual to her sweet, dark eyes. Her mouth, however, looked a trifle harder; it was still beautiful in its firm chiselling, but it looked less ready to curve into a merry smile than it had done in her happy days at Appledore. The perfect rest of this place and the bracing sea-air had, however, benefited the girl. At first she had been troubled by her father's constant questions, and had found a difficulty in soothing his uneasiness. Fortunately he had not suspected the truth. The idea that tormented him was that this removal to the sea, as well as the enlargement of the house in Broad Street, were both sacrifices made on his behalf by his too generous friend. One of Ruth's trials had been the having to listen to her father's constant praises of her husband, and his congratulations on the treasure she possessed in Michael's love. Almost every day Bryant had asked her when she expected a visit from Michael, but his confirmed optimism had after a time quieted Bryant's misgivings. His returning health and strength helped him to the conclusion that probably this delay was the best thing that could have happened with regard to the future happiness both of Michael and Ruth; it would give them time to get used to one another, and would help his daughter to appreciate the good and lovable qualities of her husband.

He could not, however, understand Michael's absence, or the need of the prolonged absences from home which now and again Michael spoke of when he wrote to his father-in-law. In these brief notes there was usually an enclosure for Ruth, but Bryant did not know that this enclosure simply contained the monthly payment which Michael sent to his wife with a request for acknowledgment, and an inquiry for her health and her father's.

It was certain that Ruth's health and strength had benefited by the air of Dolmouth, and by the relief from pressing anxiety about her father's illness; but the deepened consciousness of her own wrong-doing and of her utter dependence on a man to whom she could make no return had aged the girl.

As she now sat, her eyes—sometimes brown, sometimes a greenish gray, according to the light that fell on them—fixed on the far-off, sullen sea, she looked very lovely; but her expression had changed. The unexpected mobility of her face had been one of its charms. Now, though sweet and kind thoughts still glistened in her liquid eyes, and at times curved her lovely lips in a passing smile, or the reflection of deeper, sadder feelings flitted over her face, as the shadow of a passing cloud falls on a bright landscape, the brilliant, saucy glances that once made her sweet face so bewitching, so irresistibly fascinating, had gone seemingly forever. Her movements even were slower than they used to be. She had told her father only this morning that she had suddenly become ten years older. Sometimes when Bryant asked her how soon she expected a letter from Michael her short answers roused his curiosity, and she found it so

difficult to avoid a falsehood that she was glad to escape as soon as she could to her favorite haunt, the little lonely bay. Ruth loved to come here at ebb-tide. She had sat on the shingle this afternoon watching the dull, sad-colored water, and listening to its ever-lessening moan, watching the dip of the sea-gull's wing, till the dreary monotony soothed the irritation which some words of her father's had caused.

He had been telling her how he longed for a grandchild—another little Ruth; “the picture of yourself, though there can never be again such another little maid,” he had added.

While he spoke the blood flew to Ruth's milk-white skin in angry protest, dyeing the fair face till it even showed on her temples and among her hair. She snatched her hat and came out here; and all this while she had little by little gained calm in gazing over the sea; it was so infinite! Her own feelings showed themselves weak and puny in the face of this mighty, over-mastering power. Then, after awhile, her thoughts went on to the Eternal Law which bade this ebb and flow be ceaseless. The sea obeyed the law of its being. What was she, then, that she should make her life a continued struggle against the fate that had married her to Michael Clifford? She started at a touch on her shoulder.

A little boy stood beside her, a delicately made child of about four years old. His cheeks were rosy, and his sunny hair veiled bright, dark eyes; but the hand he had put on Ruth's shoulder was too tiny and fragile for childish health, and the small pair of legs above his black socks were too slender, though from the smallness of the bones they did not look skinny.

There was, too, a wistful restlessness about him as he peered over her shoulder at Ruth.

"Why!" he exclaimed, "what a time you have sat here quite still, doing nothing! Nurse saw you when I came out for my walk; she saw you across the meadow. I wanted to come to you, but nurse scolded; she said; 'You must not trouble the lady.' Do I trouble you, dear?"

The pathetic ring in the thin, cracked voice went to Ruth's heart; she slid her arm round the little fellow, drew him close to her, and kissed him over and over again.

"You never trouble me, darling; you are my dear little comfort."

He wriggled himself out of her arms, so that he could see her face.

"Comfort!" he said wonderingly; "you don't want comfort; you are well, and you don't have to wear black frocks."

A cloud came over the bright, eager little face as he looked at his black clothes. Ruth knew that the child wore mourning for his mother, and that his father, the rector of the little parish, had been away for some months from ill health.

She bent forward and tenderly kissed him.

"Shall I call you my sunshine?" she said; "you are such a happy little fellow!"

He danced about, and then began to speak so eagerly that the words came tumbling out one on top of the other, so that he stammered a little in getting them in order.

"I—I'se not twite happy. When papa comes home, then I'll be happy."

"You have your uncle," Ruth said.

He danced away from her again, holding his hat with his tiny hand, for the wind was rising. Presently he came back and stood in front of her.

"Did you mean Uncle Peter?" he gave an incredulous look, screwed his small mouth, and began to whistle. "I say, dear" [he put his hand on Ruth's shoulder], "dont' tell nurse, you know; *acos she* says he's the best uncle 'at a little boy ever had; but *I* think Uncle Peter's a dunce."

Ruth laughed; she knew the Reverend Peter Mould had in his earlier days taken a double first at Oxford, and that he was still a fellow of one of its most distinguished colleges. She had heard from Mrs. Rimell that he was too shy and reserved to be expected to call on any one, but that the curate supplied this omission with regard to the poor people.

"A dunce, is he? I wonder what you mean by a dunce, Watty? Am I a dunce?"

"You!"—he gave her a vehement hug, and stood leaning against her shoulder; "I should just say you wasn't! Why, you knows everything, I 'spect—just like papa does. You knows how to pet and kiss me" [he gave her a tender little squeeze]; "you knows 'musing stories. I love stories, I do. Why I b'lieve if we was in-doors you could do 'Ride a Cock-horse' and 'Going to Market' as well as papa does."

"Oh, yes!" said Ruth, laughing; "and I can do 'Margery Daw.'"

Watty looked aggrieved.

"Look here!" he said. "Last night I asked Uncle Peter if he could do 'This Little Pig Went to Market,' and he just looked up from his book and pushed

up his speckles and stared." The little mimic's face expressed such utter bewilderment that Ruth could not help laughing. "Well, he did look so," the child went on gravely; "and he said he didn't know about pigs, but he would like to teach me to read for myself."

Watty made such a wry face that Ruth said, "That was very kind of your uncle."

Her little friend stood upright and looked suspiciously at her. "I want to do what papa does," he answered, after a minute's thought. "I heard him tell the schoolmistress 'at I was to wait till I was five."

"It will be nice for you to be able to read," Ruth smiled at her little friend, who stood looking into her eyes as if he meant to read her thoughts.

"I don't know," he said; "you are going to be my wife; you said 'yes' when I asked you. Well, then, you can read, can't you? A husband and a wife needn't both read, you know." He looked triumphant, and then darted away from her on to the wet sand and came back with a spray of dried seaweed and held it out to her.

"But, Watty," she said, when she had kissed him for his present, "I might be ill, like your papa, and then I should want you to read to me."

He looked perplexed and stood lost in thought; then he burst out eagerly: "I know, I'll tell you; don't never be ill—that'll be the best way."

He put his arm round her neck, and she fondled the little delicate hand and kissed the child's warm, flushed cheeks.

"You are a darling," she said; "you must come

and see my father one of these days. Ask your uncle if you may come."

"Why, of course I may. Why didn't you ask me sooner? You live in a cottage, so you must be a villager; I know I may go and see villagers."

He flushed when he saw that she was laughing.

"I don't think you are the same as the other villagers; you are a lady, and of course your papa is a gentleman; but you must be villagers if you live in the village, mustn't you?"

Ruth did not answer; she sat wondering whether she and her father should live on for years in this quiet, lonely place, buried alive, as it were, from every one they had ever known. She had heard more than once from her aunt and from her cousin Peggy, but she had not answered their letters, which had been forwarded to her from Appledore. The girl had often wished to write to Sally Voce to inquire what was happening at the old place, but she felt too much ashamed of her present position to run the risk of exposing it to Sally. She knew how inquisitive the woman was, and she might take it into her head to come over if this opening were given her.

"Why do you come here, dear?" The small cracked voice roused Ruth from a reverie. "Why don't you go to the big beach round the point?" he nodded toward the right end of the bay; "it's more 'musing there, and you'd see Tom and Joe; they're always on that beach when they don't go out fishing. Nobody never comes here."

"That's why I like it, darling. I like to have you and the sea all to myself."

Walter stood thinking; his ready wit for once had failed him. At last he burst out:

"I say, what do you do when I don't come? Doesn't nobody come and talk to you? They can't get round the point, nurse says, 'cept there's spring-tides. Why, look! Do look! There's a gemper coming round now."

Ruth looked where he pointed.

Coming round a white mass of rock, almost tall enough to be called a cliff, that made the boundary of her little bay, she saw Reginald Bevington. Her first impulse was to take flight as a refuge from the intense longing she felt to see him, and the joy his mere presence gave her; but she knew the thought was idle. Before she could possibly reach the meadow he would be beside her. She hesitated a moment as to whether she should send Watty away or keep him beside her, but reflection quickly warned her that the child would certainly tell his nurse all that he heard, and she did not put much confidence in Mr. Bevington's self-control. She felt sure he would reproach her for her marriage. She must take care of her own reputation in Dolmouth.

"We had better go home, dear Watty," she said. "My father will be looking for me, and I expect your nurse is waiting tea for you. Run away home, darling, and ask your uncle if you may come and have tea with us to-morrow."

Meanwhile Mr. Bevington was coming very slowly forward, picking his way over the fallen masses of rock that added to the natural barrier at the angle of the semicircle. Watty lingered; he was anxious to get a nearer view of the new arrival, a strange gen-

tleman being rare at Dolmouth. Ruth abruptly rose; she took the child's tiny hand and led him up to the top of the beach.

"Let me see how fast you can run," she said. "I will come presently."

Watty went off at full speed, and seeing this Reginald Bevington mended his pace and came directly toward Ruth. She held up her hand in warning as she stood watching the child, and the young man went down toward the sand and flung himself on the beach. Watty stopped when he was half-way across the meadow and looked back; he waved his cap and Ruth nodded and kissed her hand, and the child started afresh. He was soon a small black speck flying across the green meadow.

When Watty was out of sight Ruth turned and came down the beach toward Mr. Bevington.

His eyes had not left her; he had been studying every line of her figure, and the outline of her lovely face, as she stood sideways against the full light looking after the boy.

CHAPTER XXX.

REGINALD BEVINGTON had finally determined that he would avoid Mrs. Clifford. There was no use, he thought, in exposing himself to such a trial. If he had been asked he could not have said why he was here to-day. A sudden impulse had seized him; he had felt that he must see Ruth, and he had started for Appledore without regard to consequences. It may be that a letter received the day before from Lady Emily, in which she asked him for news of his beautiful friend, had helped to rekindle his passion. He had just returned from abroad, and he found Bevington intolerably dull. It is certain that the shock of discovering that the Bryants no longer possessed Appledore, and that even John Bird was uncertain as to where they had gone, had greatly excited him. The longing to find himself once more beside Ruth became irresistible, and now that he saw her, lovelier, more blooming than ever, he could not realize that there was any barrier between them.

He sprang up from the shingle and came toward her, smiling and holding out his hand.

The girl was surprised; she had expected an angry outburst to begin with. His smile reassured her; she shook hands with him in silence, and drew her fingers gently from the warm clasp in which he tried to hold them.

"We may be friends still, I hope," he said.

She smiled faintly; the pain at her heart was almost more than she could bear. Till she saw him she had lately been trying to believe that her love was dead and buried, levelled out of existence by the monotony which had lulled thought to sleep, as much as by her resolution not to wrong Michael by thinking about his rival. Now she felt lifted off her feet with wild joy at sight of the face she had so dearly loved.

“Are you still angry with me, Ruth?” he went on tenderly. “You must forgive me—indeed you must! Surely you will not refuse me your friendship? I only ask for that. Surely even your husband will allow you to see an old friend?”

She flushed so deeply red that he was puzzled. He waited silently for her to explain.

“I have no husband,” she said sadly. “I went to church with Mr. Clifford, and I bear his name; but he is nothing to me. He would not have me for his wife because—because—he knows about you.”

“How can he know?” he said impetuously.

“I told him; it was his right to know.”

He stood looking at her in surprise.

“Why did you tell him? It was so unnecessary, so wounding!”

Ruth stared at him in surprise.

“I do not understand you.”

“I mean, dear girl, that when you have mixed a little more with the world you will learn the truth of the saying, that ‘What the eye does not see the heart does not feel.’ I mean that it is quite unnecessary for a husband or a wife to confide all their friendships to one another. If I had married this spring I should

not have spoken of you to my wife; you know that I did not even tell you I was engaged. Besides, our case is special. No marriage can interfere with a true friendship like ours, dear girl."

He took a step forward, but Ruth moved away; her words had so fired his love that he could hardly keep it within bounds, and his face betrayed him.

"You are bound to be kind to me," he said, in his sweet, low tone; it thrilled through the girl and made her tremble; "and I will tell you why. For your sake, because I would not give up loving you, I have lost my promised wife and the fortune she was to bring me. I am as free, dearest, as I was in those happy days at Appledore. You ought at least to make up to me for that loss, sweet one. Besides, it removes your scruples; I am all your own."

Ruth murmured something, but she did not know what she said. She had made so sure that she and Reginald Bevington were finally parted that surprise and unreadiness mastered her. There was something, too, stronger than either surprise or unreadiness—something that flushed her face and glowed in her eyes as they met her lover's. It was all in vain she felt that she had turned from the thought of him, that she had tried to believe he meant evil rather than good toward her; the love she saw in his eyes was fast undoing all her resolutions. She had been allowing her thoughts to drift as they pleased in these weeks of idle dreaming by the sea, and the process had not strengthened her moral tone. She had wilfully ignored the power of her love, had carelessly glossed it over, instead of striving to uproot it; and now she was powerless—it had its way. As her

eyes met Reginald's she saw that they swam with tenderness. He came still nearer and tried to put his arm round her. She drew back instantly.

"If you have so little respect for me I must leave you," she said sadly. "You forget that this place is not private."

"Pardon me! I deserve reproof, but I forget everything but you. You may trust me, my own Ruth; you are mine; you cannot say you have left off loving me."

She was silent.

"I will be so patient," he went on, "so very patient. I will do anything you ask; but, dear friend, you will let me come and see you? You own that your husband has deserted you. Truly, his marriage was the trick of the dog in the manger! Why did he take you if he does not value you? But for him you could be mine absolutely. How do you know, my Ruth, that this Clifford has not a dearer friend somewhere, whose society he prefers to yours?"

Ruth hung her head. She knew it was her fault that her companion dared to speak in this way of Michael; she need not have told Mr. Bevington her present position. It flashed upon her that her husband's name might have proved a shield in her present position if she had not been so foolishly candid. She reddened with a guilty consciousness that she had made this avowal for Reginald's sake, to relieve him from the pain of believing her unfaithful to him.

He misunderstood her silence.

"It is so, then? By Jove! how dared he come between us? How dared he marry you, my sweet Ruth?"

The words seemed to pierce into her brain, and to let fresh light on her troubled thoughts.

She no longer saw the flushed face of her handsome young lover; she saw in his place her husband, stern and powerful, as he had looked when he stood towering over her and asked her how she had dared to marry him. What a coward she was, knowing all the blame to be duly hers, to let any of it light on Michael!

"No," she said firmly, "my husband is not capable of such conduct. He loved me dearly, but he has a right to be offended; he knows I do not love him."

Bevington angrily interrupted her.

"Nonsense! As if you were fit to marry such a person! I can understand that you married him for your father's sake, in the same way I was going to marry to please my mother. On the whole, I thank Mr. Clifford for the pattern he has set me. I assure you I am not above following it. I shall never give you up. You are dearer to me than a wife can ever be. Come, dearest, let us go and see your father. I long to shake hands again with the kind old man."

He had spoken impetuously. Carried out of himself by the force of his passion, he had let his words come at will. He caught Ruth's hand as he ended, and held it so tightly that she could not draw it away without a struggle. She was so dizzied and bewildered that she was even glad to be guided up the steep layers of shingle; but the delight that thrilled through her veins at his touch was a true warning. Every beating pulse told her how she still loved her companion, and how urgent it was that she should keep her promise to her husband. She felt that she

must send Mr. Bevington away, and the sooner the better, if she meant to keep her word. She had become lazy and listless while she sat day after day gazing at the sea. She was indeed demoralized; but a few weeks will not undo the teaching of a lifetime, and Ruth's mother had lived long enough to teach her child how to find help to do her duty in this sore strait.

When they reached the border of the meadow the girl drew her hand swiftly from her companion's grasp and uttered a brief unspoken prayer. "Lead me not into temptation," she said silently, and though the words seemed formal and lifeless the very effort to seek stronger help than her own nerved her against her weakness.

She turned to Mr. Bevington.

"You must leave me," she said with a decision that surprised him. "I promised that I would not willingly see you, and you must help me to keep my word. Go away now, and do not try to see me again."

"I cannot go away, and you must not ask me to make such a promise. I have kept true to you; you confess that your marriage was a sham. Why, then, can we not be friends? See, I do not even ask to kiss your hand. Why do you wish to deprive me of the exquisite joy of seeing you now and then? It would be such a comfort to tell you my troubles. You forget that you are my only real friend."

While she stood listening Ruth's heart pleaded powerfully in his favor. Her eyes were fixed on the grass, and she mechanically counted the plantain heads that grew near her feet. Once more the re-

membrance of her husband's strong, honest face came to help her. She had told him she would have nothing to do with Reginald Bevington; how could she then break a promise? Whatever it might cost her she was bound to send this dearly loved friend away from her, and to refuse to see him again.

She looked up at last, sad but determined.

"Let us say good-by here," she said. "I believe you care for me. If you do you must wish me to do right; it must be wrong for us to meet at present."

"Why must it be wrong?" he asked vehemently. "Just because you have gone through an empty form with a man you do not love, who will never be anything more to you than a mere acquaintance? It is a mere fancy of duty that possesses you, and it is utterly unreal, a thorough mistake. You shall not sacrifice our lives to it." He paused; then he said quietly: "Be patient, my darling! Take time to think! I will go now, but I will call and see your father, and then, dearest Ruth, we will have another talk. Good-by, sweet friend!"

He raised his hat and left her, the more readily because he saw the little boy coming across the field from the cottage, followed by a staid-looking woman.

"It's all right, dear; I may come to tea," the child shouted; but Ruth hurried across the meadow, passing him with a nod, while Mrs. Rimell, who had come out with Watty and now turned homeward again, kept her eyes keenly fixed on her lodger's flushed face.

The landlady was sorely disturbed; she had let these lodgings for years past, but her visitors had

always been highly respectable. Now, as she watched Mrs. Clifford, she told herself that she had always misdoubted her. She was too beautiful to be left alone in this way by a newly-married husband, unless there was a reason for it; and the landlady thought that this handsome, fashionable young man was a more than sufficient reason for a husband's jealousy. Mrs. Rimell had always been poor, but a strong sense of what she called "gentility" had kept her from making acquaintances. She had seen scarcely anything of life or of people; she was therefore suspicious, apt to see wrong-doing in anything that differed from her own small sphere of experience, and was extremely narrow in her judgments. She at once decided that this beautiful Mrs. Clifford was not "what she should be," or what her husband thought she was; and Mrs. Rimell wished she had never come under her roof, though she did pay so regularly. The landlady gave an involuntary sigh, and Ruth turned and looked at her. The keen suspicion in the woman's face alarmed the girl; for a moment she felt tempted to justify herself, and then she saw that explanation was quite uncalled for.

Philip Bryant looked excited when his daughter came in; his lips quivered at the sight of Ruth.

"Who is it, my girl?" he said eagerly. "Your little chap came in, and said there was a gentleman on the beach and you had stayed with him. Was it Michael, dear?" Ruth felt stunned; it had not occurred to her that Watty would go in and see her father. "That youngster's a spreck little chap," her father went on. "He came in to see you with a message from his uncle, and when I said he would

find you on the beach he nodded. 'Is she there still?' he said. 'She was there with a gentleman.'"

"It was not Michael," she said slowly. "It was Mr. Bevington; he wants to call and see you."

Bryant smiled with pleasure.

"I take that to be exceedingly kind of Mr. Bevington," he said. "I shall be very glad to see him. But he was always a perfect gentleman, Ruth—not one of your make-believes. He was as free with his money as he was pleasant. I'm sure I shall be right down glad to see him. Did you ask him to supper, my girl?"

Ruth laughed in a hard, forced way. It struck her as grotesque, this notion of asking her lover to sup under the roof which her husband had provided for her.

"I am not sure whether he will call to-day or to-morrow;" then, in a firmer tone, "but, father, we could not ask Mr. Bevington to come and see us. Michael would not like it."

Her father leaned back in his chair and stared at her with an amused expression in his still handsome brown eyes.

"My dear girl," he said deprecatingly, "isn't that absurd? You women take fads into your heads—even a good woman like you, Ruth."

She shivered and shrank into herself.

"Don't call me good, father! Please don't!" she checked herself; since his illness she dared not speak about anything to her father that might trouble him when he was left alone.

"Well, my girl," he said fondly, "if you're not good I'd like to see a better. What I meant was

that Michael was always partial to the young gentleman. Besides that, do you suppose, child, that you can do wrong in Michael's eyes?"

"I'll go and take off my hat."

Her father looked at her in surprise, she so rarely spoke abruptly to him; but Ruth hurried at once to her bedroom. She so longed for sympathy and help that she had nearly told him in how sore a strait she found herself. If only her mother had been spared to her!

She stood in her room, her hands clasped round the post of the old-fashioned bedstead, her head pressed against it; and then, with the longing for her mother, came a vivid remembrance of her mother's teaching. The unhappy girl became conscious that she was not left alone; she seemed to know that there was help for her if she would only seek it. She stood with bent head and clasped hands, while every instant the conviction took more complete possession of her will. Then slowly, reverently, she knelt down and prayed with all her heart and soul that God would save her from herself and from her sinful love.

CHAPTER XXXI.

RUTH had never been to school, and she had read few novels. She had not had one intimate girl friend except Peggy Whishaw. She may also have been helped by the masculine tone of her education. Certainly she had not spent her girlhood in dreaming of a possible husband. She had led such a healthy, happy life that she had no tendency to morbid ideas. She had thought of love and of marriage in a healthy, natural fashion, as facts that would probably come into her life. It was doubtless this absence of self-consciousness that had at first made her so blind to the nature of her own feelings for Reginald Bevington. His singular charm of manner, the complete contrast he afforded to any one she had ever known, had fascinated the fresh, simple-natured girl. Before she saw Mr. Bevington, when she sometimes thought of a husband, Ruth had decided that she must marry a man of strong character. She knew her own tendency to self-will, and she longed for a guide. She had mourned her grandfather almost as much for the real loss she experienced in his self-reliance and his ability to advise, as from the love she had for him. Her devoted love for her father had never allowed her to become fully aware of his weakness of character. They had been more like brother and sister than father and daughter. When of late circumstances had forced this weakness on

her notice she reminded herself that he had told her her mother was the first good influence that had come into his life. Ruth always shrank from judging others, and she also troubled herself very little as to what others might think of her. She had looked up to Reginald Bevington. His outward superiority had so impressed her that in the generous faith of her nature she had believed it to be thorough. She had hoped he would help her father by his advice. His request for secrecy before he left Appledore had been a blow to her confidence, but she reflected that he had his own parents to study, and he did not, she told herself, know her father as well as she did, and could not therefore be expected to put full trust in Philip Bryant's silence.

It seemed to her now as she prepared to rejoin her father that she had not done Mr. Bevington justice this afternoon. He had been excited at meeting her, and had said things which his sober judgment would condemn; but he had also said he meant to keep within the lines of friendship. It seemed to her that she had been cowardly; she had asked him to leave her as if she were afraid of herself, when she ought to have asked his advice, and to have relied on his friendship to help her. Just now she had resolved that she would not see him again, but this last thought had given her courage. They must meet once more, she decided, and they must resolve to help one another to be brave in bearing the trial that had been sent them.

"If we both try in earnest we shall be helped," she said to herself.

She went downstairs to her father in a wrought-up

mood, feeling happier than she had felt in her weeks of aimless dreaming.

Philip Bryant kept expecting his visitor; he talked incessantly of him in a half-childish way. But Mr. Bevington did not come to the cottage. His scruples with regard to Ruth had vanished since he had learned her husband's desertion. The sight of her, the love he had read in her eyes, had fired him with the determination to win her. Lady Emily would not have believed her young cousin capable of the prompt energy he showed. He found on inquiry that he could get to Munby, the nearest market-town, by train; and he decided to go over and sleep there. He had seen for himself that Ruth was unhappy, and she was neglected by her husband. He felt that he could never change toward her; she would always be the one love of his life. He was convinced that he could make her happy; it must therefore be his duty to do so.

His idea was to take her away from Dolmouth tomorrow. He could give her and her father a better home than the Dolmouth cottage, and he persuaded himself that Ruth would consent to go with him if she had her father to live with her. Mr. Bevington meant to see Bryant next morning. It was quite possible, he thought, that he might be brought to second his views, if he did not make them too apparent at starting. Reginald had a clear recollection of the farmer's willingness to drift and let things come as they would. Surely, if he could little by little induce Bryant to see that his daughter's present mode of life was unreasonable, and that doubtless the husband would be glad to get rid of her, Bev-

ington shut his eyes as to what might happen in the future. If it obtruded itself he told himself that he should never leave off loving Ruth; how could he? He did not believe, now that he had seen her again, that there was such another woman.

He found a quiet lodging in Munby, which he thought would do for Bryant until he wished him to join his daughter. He meant to go abroad with Ruth, so as to avoid all gossip; and then, having finished his arrangements, he took the train for Dolmouth.

Mrs. Rimell's gentility had made her adverse from visiting her neighbors, but she had one chum in Dolmouth, Miss Tabitha Stamper, who kept the post office and sold photographs and stationery. Miss Stamper had been told a good deal in favor of Mr. Bryant, who had fulfilled Clifford's expectations with regard to his landlady. His good looks, his winning manners, and his lameness had made the shy, kindly woman devoted to him; and she sang his praises to her friend in their frequent chats in Miss Tabitha's sanctum behind the curtained glass door that led into the shop, but the landlady rarely praised Mrs. Clifford. Mrs. Rimell considered that her lady lodger was unnecessarily beautiful; she was very pleasant, but she was not a patch on her father. She was unsociable; she had never, even on her first arrival, asked Mrs. Rimell to take a walk with her, or tell her about the place. Mrs. Clifford rarely wrote a letter, very seldom sewed, did not often read; her chief delight indoors was to sit at the pianoforte which her husband had hired from Munby and sing till Mrs. Rimell, who disliked music, wondered her lodger's throat

could stand it; but then Mrs. Clifford was so little in-doors. She either sat with her father in the garden or on that lonely strip of beach, or else took long walks quite by herself. Mrs. Rimell did not tell out these facts about her lodger, she merely let them fall in the way of hints from her pale, flabby lips, when her friend Tabitha tried her patience by recounting the effect which Ruth's appearance in church had created in the mind of Miss Stamper's nephew, the owner of the all-shop of Dolmouth, and on those of his single fellow-townsmen. Miss Tabitha whispered that the village schoolmaster, a married man with a family of young children, had been heard to say that the strange lady was as beautiful as an angel. "Such an expression, you know, dear Mrs. Rimell, to apply to another man's wife!"

Yesterday evening Miss Stamper had heard of Mrs. Clifford's interview with a strange gentleman on the beach, and the cronies had shaken their heads, and had wondered what husbands could expect who left giddy young wives to take care of themselves. It was therefore natural that when next day Mrs. Rimell threw open her lodgers' parlor door and announced "A gentleman to see you, sir," she looked grimer than ever.

Ruth, happening to glance at her, was surprised at the spitefulness of the woman's expression.

Reginald Bevington went up to his old friend and shook hands. His greeting was affectionate and yet full of tact. It seemed for the moment to Ruth as if the old days at Appledore had come back. The young fellow was evidently delighted to see his old friend. Except for the extreme gentleness of his

manner there was nothing to indicate consciousness of the great change he saw in Philip Bryant. He then turned to Ruth, greeting her in an easy friendly manner, without any of the glow of pleasure that had sparkled in his eyes at sight of her father.

The girl smiled. "He is what I fancied he was," she thought; "he knows how hard it is for me to see him, and he will not make it harder for me than I can bear."

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Bevington," her father said, in his genial way; "but you should have come earlier; we could have given you some lunch."

"Thank you, I am staying in Munby. I only came out to see you. I want you to come out to me there. You will come, you and your daughter, won't you, Mr. Bryant?"

Bryant looked delighted. A broad smile spread over his face, but Bevington saw that he looked appealingly at Ruth.

"It is very kind of you," he said; "we shall enjoy a little change, shan't we, Ruth?"

Ruth was looking very grave. This proposal had made her suddenly nervous, but she had determined that her father should not guess the truth. Such a revelation might, she thought, bring on a fresh seizure.

"You are still weak, dear," she said affectionately; then she looked directly at Mr. Bevington, and forced herself to speak as if the subject were completely indifferent to her.

"My dear father looks so much stronger than he is. You would not guess how much even a short

railway journey would try him. He could not possibly go to Munby."

Bevington looked hard at her, and her eyes fell under his. Her opposition only served to inflame him; it made him even more determined.

"But, my dear Mrs. Clifford, every precaution shall be taken. I have ascertained that an invalid-carriage can be had, so that Mr. Bryant can lie on a sofa all the way. I assure you there will be no fatigue."

Ruth felt too desperate to maintain her show of indifference. Her brown eyebrows contracted, and the square corners of her expressive mouth were strangely hard and set. Her father had been watching her with surprise, and he remembered what she had said about her husband.

"You leave it to me, Mr. Bevington," he said, with his kind smile. "I'll talk it over with Ruth and let you know when to expect us, as you are kind enough to wish us to come." Bevington was earnestly wishing that Ruth would leave the room. He recognized that a great mental change had passed over her father. To this ardent young fellow, full of life and animal vigor, the poor, still figure in the easy-chair seemed helpless alike in mind and body. It would depend, Reginald thought, whether he or Ruth had the stronger power over the invalid; and as Ruth in her heart was on his side, if he could only get Bryant to himself for a few minutes her scruples, he told himself, would have to give way. He glanced at her as she sat near her father, and he thought she looked utterly unyielding. He decided to wait. He would come over again and see Bryant

alone, and then as he remembered how dutiful Ruth had been he told himself he would get such a hold over Bryant as would oblige Ruth to give up her opposition.

"It is not real," he said to himself. "The sweet darling longs to come to me, but she is afraid."

To Ruth's surprise he did not repeat his invitation. After a few more words with Bryant about Appledore and its present tenant, he took his leave, his manner to the girl being the same as his greeting had been—friendly, but entirely indifferent.

As soon as the visitor had left them Bryant looked gravely at his daughter.

"Why do you grudge me a little change?" he said in the pathetic tone which he knew had power to move her. "Why won't you let me go to Munby? I am quite well now—you know I am."

Ruth stood thinking. Her difficulties were thickening. She had always believed that she had hastened her father's second seizure by her confession to him on the eve of her marriage. She fancied that his memory had been affected by this last illness, for he often spoke to her of Michael as if he were ignorant that she cared for some one else. His manner to Mr. Bevington to-day had shown her that he did not in any way suspect the relations between them. It was, she considered, essential for her father's sake that he should never learn the truth.

"I did not know you cared for change, dear," she said lovingly. "I am only thinking of Michael. It is not my fancy; indeed it is not. The last time he came to Appledore he spoke very harshly of Mr. Bevington, and I promised him I would not willingly

see this gentleman again. Do you not think that my husband would have a right to be angry if we were to accept Mr. Bevington's hospitality?"

Bryant looked disappointed and fretful.

"That's all very well now," he said, "but you must excuse me for saying you are inconsistent. If Michael told you this, how was it that you stayed talking on the beach alone with this young man?"

He was looking at her inquisitively, and the girl shivered at the danger before her. She waited to collect her thoughts before she answered:

"I was telling Mr. Bevington what I had promised; I let him know that my husband does not like him."

Bryant's face flushed with vexation.

"That was extremely imprudent and unnecessary. You are wise for a woman, Ruth, but still you are only a woman. No man would have said such a thing. I am sure it was very good-natured of the young fellow to come and see me after such an insult. I'll tell you what it is, my dear. I don't want to hurt you, and I know there's no use in meddling between man and wife, but there's something about Michael's behavior to you that doesn't satisfy me. I know he sacrificed himself on my account—the doctor told me as much when he came to see us off—but what I don't understand is this continued absence. He must come back to Purley now and again. Well, then, why don't he run over to see you?"

Ruth put her hand over her face, and he thought she was crying.

"There, there, dear child!" he said; "forgive me! Try and forget what I've said. I know you feel as

I do that after what Michael's done for me I ought not to say a word against him, or dispute his wishes. Well, I won't say any more. Kiss me, darling; and you shall help me write a letter to Mr. Bevington. I'll let him see that we can't accept his kindness once for all."

CHAPTER XXXII.

PHILIP BRYANT was right when he said Michael Clifford must sometimes have gone back to Purley. He did not know that on these occasions Michael had contrived to make his stay as short as possible.

His anger against Ruth had subsided; he had not been able to sustain it, and he so ardently longed for an excuse to present himself at the cottage that he was afraid to remain in Purley, lest he might be tempted against his better judgment to visit Dolmouth. He knew that his best hope of winning his wife's love lay in avoiding her till she should make the first advance to reconciliation. He could not now go back to his first idea of trying little by little to win Ruth's love; their last meeting had made that hope impossible. He would not now take Ruth as his wife till he had proof that she no longer loved this other man. He told himself angrily when this thought came that she ought never to have thought of Reginald Bevington as a lover.

Clifford's own love, however, was Ruth's best advocate on this point; he could judge her feelings by his own. He knew that he ought not to have allowed himself to care for her as he did, but when he tried to think this out and go back to the beginning he could not find a clew to guide him. He could not possibly fix a time when he had not loved the girl;

it seemed to him that he had always thought of her in one way, and had longed to have her for his wife. His love seemed to go back to her very young days, when she was still studying with her grandfather, and when Michael had only had occasional glimpses of her, and had dreamed out a possible future as he rode back to Purley.

Only one fact stood out clearly revealed to him as he thought of his disastrous marriage. If Ruth could not bring herself to love him his life was irretrievably marred. He knew that he could not think of any other woman, even if it were possible to free himself from Ruth. She had even come between him and Dorothy, for he could not forget his sister's just and well-founded warning, and he could not forget the jar it had caused between them.

He had invited himself to spend Christmas with his brother in Scotland, and he was now on his way. He hoped to persuade Dorothy to come and stay with him at Purley as soon as his house was ready. At present the brick-layers were idle; there had been a sharp frost for a fortnight, and this seemed likely to continue. If the weather should change before the end of January the builder assured Mr. Clifford the house could be ready for occupation by March. Clifford longed to be at home again, and yet he was now asking himself what excuse he should make, when the house was ready to receive her, for his wife's continued absence.

It was a relief to reach the end of his journey. Late as it was he rejoiced to see that his brother lived on the farther side of the little town of Dalgarno. There was glimmer enough left to show him

that the square house stood by itself in its own grounds and in the country.

The sight of Dorothy was very cheering. She looked stronger and healthier than he had ever seen her, and he was rejoiced to see his tall, bronzed brother, whom he had not seen for more than a year.

At breakfast next morning he was introduced to his two nieces, Maggie and Lucy. Since he had seen them they had passed from children into a couple of fair-skinned, dark-eyed girls. They reminded him of their fair, sweet Scotch mother; they had her yellow hair and her soft, kind voice, with their father's dark eyes and tall, erect figure. It pleased Michael to see how devoted they were to "Aunt Dorothy," and he was surprised to see the change which increased responsibilities had worked in Dorothy. She was twice as brisk, more like the thoughtful mother of a family than the petted invalid she had been at Purley.

"You are stronger, are you not?" he said to her.

"I hope so," she answered, "but do you know I begin to think I might have done a good deal more than I did at Purley if you had not spoiled me. You see I had grown to think your notion that I was not strong enough to be useful was correct. Instead of trying to find out for myself how much I really could do, I simply indulged myself at your expense."

It was delightful to Michael after his long solitude from all family ties to find himself once more with those who loved him. It was especially delightful to be again with Dorothy; but for a day or two he avoided any opportunity of finding himself alone with his sister.

Dorothy had divined this avoidance; she also shrank from a talk which must necessarily turn on her brother's marriage. Hitherto she had only spoken of his wife when she inquired for her and for Mr. Bryant. At last the chance came. David Clifford took his daughters into Edinburgh to see an old friend of their mother's, and Michael said he should stay at home with Dorothy and take a walk with her on the moor behind the house. The house stood alone. In front there was a view of the river backed by fields, but behind was a wide-spreading moor that stretched up, heather-covered, to the pine-crowned hill.

The sun was shining brightly, and Dorothy's pale cheeks glowed with the keen, bleak air and exercise as she led the way across the moor.

"I wish you could have seen this heather in autumn," she said; "it was such a glorious purple against the blue-green of the pines! Those brown masses of faded blossom show you what it was. Higher up the heather grows so deep that when I played 'hide-and-seek' with Maggie and Lucy they could not find me; I only had to sit down and the ling bushes hid me completely."

Dorothy's "hide-and-seek" amused Michael.

"I'm afraid Purley will seem very slow and dull after Dalgarno," he said; "and yet, dear, I want you to come to me for awhile, when the house is free of work-people."

Dorothy looked up at him, and she saw that he was smiling, as he waited for her answer.

"You will not want me then," she said; "you will have your wife."

He did not look vexed; he seemed to have his answer ready.

"I hardly think so. Dr. Buchan told me that Mr. Bryant has a very weak heart; he does not think he can live long. I doubt if he could bear the fatigue of another move. Buchan considers that fresh seizure would carry him off; he says the pure air and the quiet of a place like Dolmouth are more likely to prolong my old friend's life than a market-town, which occasionally has some stir and bustle in it. Don't you think it would be really selfish to ask my wife to bring her father to live in Purley?"

"I always told you you were like Sir Galahad, Michael," she said impetuously. "You are too good in this case. I only wonder how your wife can bear to stay away from you; I suppose she is very good too." She felt that her lip was curling, and she also felt that she was on very tender ground. She suddenly stooped to gather a tuft of moss which lay gleaming, a brilliant, tender green, at the bottom of a little heath pool thawed by the warm sunshine. She did not see her brother suddenly redden under his stern mask of self-control.

"My wife is extremely unselfish, Dorothy. I can't bear to think what the loss of her father will be to her."

Dorothy felt irritable. It was natural, she thought, that Ruth should be fond of her father, and all these months the devoted sister had been trying to accept Michael's very singular arrangements in the light he gave them; but in Dorothy's opinion a woman's love for her husband must exceed any mere family affection—especially when Michael was the husband in question.

She gave him a cheering smile.

"Ruth will grieve a good deal, my dear boy, but she will get over it. Time is a wonderful healer, and I'm sure she will resign herself to God's will. You will go to her at once when it happens, will you not? And you will certainly be able to comfort her."

"I hope so." He turned from the subject and began hurriedly to tell her about his last foreign journey. He had come home through Germany, and he had met with some amusing experiences in his endeavors to make himself understood. He made his sister laugh till she quite forgot her discontent about Ruth.

"If she only knew the truth," Michael said to himself as they went back to the house, "if she could only guess it how angry my little Dorothy would be!"

He told himself she should never learn it. No one should ever know how Ruth had deceived him. He meant that part of their lives to be a buried memory between him and his wife. Dorothy should never know it. His visit to Dalgarno had done him good; he was becoming hopeful. The rest from incessant work, the freshness of his surroundings, and the delight of being with those of whose affection he felt sure, had helped to heal the heart-wound he had received on his last visit to Appledore. He took walks with his brother; he skated with his nieces, who were extremely elated by their uncle's companionship; but at the end of a week his restlessness had returned.

At breakfast he told his brother and Dorothy that he was due next day in Norfolk.

"If the house is ready," he said to David, "you will spare Dorothy to me at Easter? And why

should you not come too, David, for a few days—you and the girls?”

So it was settled, and Michael announced his intention of travelling by the night express to his destination. He said he had taken a most unusual holiday, and that he must make up for it by saving as much time as possible.

“You will not have started before I come home,” David said. “I shall bring the second post, and who knows but that I may bring in something to change your mind?”

Michael smiled; he had promised to take his nieces to play golf some distance off, and the expedition would take the best part of the day, as they were to lunch at a friend's house. Dorothy walked part of the way with them, and came home rather sadly by herself. She smiled as she thought of Michael's wish that she should go back to Purley; she determined if he did not forbid it that she would go over to Dolmouth and make acquaintance with Ruth. It would humanize the relations between them; for Ruth's answer to Dorothy's letter on her marriage had been so formal that it was evident she did not wish for a correspondence. And also the astute Dorothy promised herself to discover whether Ruth could not be persuaded to give up her watch over her father for a few weeks and devote herself to her husband.

“I am much better fitted to take care of Mr. Bryant now than I was when he came to Purley,” she said, rejoicing in her new stock of health.

The golfing party did not reach home long before David did. The girls, full of excitement and delight,

gathered round their father, buzzing out all they had to tell, especially to recount Uncle Michael's exploits; while their uncle was busy with the contents of a packet of letters brought in for him by his brother.

Dorothy sat watching Michael, and she saw that he kept one letter in his hand while he read the others. She guessed that the reserved letter was from his wife, and when he left the room she felt sure that he had gone to enjoy his letter in private.

The others went away, but Dorothy sat waiting till Michael came back. She saw as he entered that his face was full of suffering; he came up to her and said in a low, dejected tone: "Something very sad has happened, dear. My poor old friend has gone. Ruth has lost her father."

Dorothy stared at him in wonder; he seemed unhinged, utterly cast down, and yet he had himself said that Mr. Bryant had not long to live. She pulled herself together and thought of Ruth and her sorrow.

"Poor girl!" she said tenderly; "you will go to her at once, won't you, Michael?"

His face hardened as she looked at him.

"I cannot," he said roughly; "I am due at Norwich to-morrow; two hard-worked business men are coming to meet me there the day after to-morrow; I cannot break the appointment. And there is something else of a pressing nature; I am asked by a man who has always been one of my best friends to go with him to look at some land considerably south of Vienna. We have to start in three days; I do not see how I can go to Ruth."

Dorothy was staring at him in utter surprise.

"But, Michael, you must go to your wife. How

can she manage all alone? There will be the funeral, you know."

"That will be over by now; she did not write directly, and the letter has been delayed by going to Purley. I suppose she thought I had returned. I had not told her I had lengthened my visit here." He paused and began to walk up and down the room. Presently he came back to his sister.

"I want you to do something for me, Dorothy. I want you to go to Ruth."

Dorothy felt in a mist; she began to think that Michael and his wife had certainly quarrelled. She had thought it strange that he had not spent Christmas at Dolmouth; yet if there had been a coolness between them she fancied that Ruth's present sorrow ought to heal any cause of disagreement.

"I will go if you wish it," she said slowly, "and I will do all I can; but I am afraid I cannot be of much use in comforting a person I have never seen."

"I know you better than you know yourself," he answered. "You will be able to help and comfort Ruth. You knew her father and you liked him; and I am sure she longs for sympathy, though she says she wishes to be alone just at first. If you can be ready to start in two days' time I will write and tell her to expect you. She must not be left alone, even if she wishes it."

"Of course not——" Dorothy hesitated; she looked up at her brother's saddened face.

"I know I ought not to interfere" [she felt almost too nervous to get her words out], "but Michael dear, if you could only go to her for a day it would be so much better in every way." Dorothy could not un-

derstand her brother's conduct. Of course his wife ought to have summoned him at once, but the poor thing had perhaps been stupefied with her sorrow just at first. "I dare say it was all very sudden," she added softly.

"Ruth does not enter into detail; she only says there was another seizure and there was no return of consciousness. She called in the Dolmouth doctor, and he told her it would be useless to summon Buchan. She says that all was over before Buchan could have reached Dolmouth. The rector there has been very kind. Once for all, I cannot go to her; if you will take my place it will be a great relief to me to know you are with her."

"I will go whenever you like, Michael."

He had decided to put off his own start till to-morrow, and he now sat down beside Dorothy and planned out her journey with his usual rapidity. He told her that he should probably be absent two months, and that when he returned to Purley, if the house was still unfinished, he should join her and Ruth at Dolmouth.

During the evening both he and Dorothy were unusually silent. His strange abruptness had convinced the loving sister that there was some mystery between Michael and his wife which he did not care to explain.

Meanwhile Michael was in a strange state of alternate hope and depression. He wondered what Dorothy would have thought of his wife's letter. At night, when he went to his room he read it through again.

Ruth began by telling him that her father had died three days before; she told this simply, but with

a sadness that brought tears to her husband's eyes. She said the rector had been very kind to her, and had helped her in making arrangements for the funeral. "I am sure," the letter went on, "your first feeling **will be** to come to me in my trouble. I entreat you not to do this; I could not bear it. Please leave me to myself. I owe you too much already, and I do not wish to add to the debt. No, Michael; it is not only that. I must tell you the whole truth. I am trying to look at my future life really, and by God's help I hope to do my duty to you, whether you forgive me or not. But do not let us meet yet; let things take their course. If we force ourselves to be friends, if we meet now, it will only make our future, whatever that may be, more difficult. Do not come to Dolmouth; but now that I am alone, if you will sometimes write to me I shall be thankful to get your letters."

Michael felt less hopeful when he had read the letter again.

"Women are governed by their feelings," he said to himself. "Her father's death has made her penitent and emotional. She perhaps feels that she has unsettled and spoiled my life. If she were really sorry she would be glad to give some proof of it; she would ask me to come to her, and she would have written at once."

He grieved for the loss of his old friend and for Ruth's trial; but the sore, ill-used feeling had come back. He could not bring himself to forgive his wife's persistent avoidance of him, or to feel as kindly toward her as he had been feeling when her letter reached him.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

RUTH stood on the platform of the little railway station waiting for her sister-in-law, and when Dorothy stepped out of the train the two women looked at one another for a moment before they exchanged greetings. The little sister had never fully believed in Michael's description of Ruth's beauty. She had expected to see a far more ordinary girl. She was greatly impressed when she saw this lovely, stately creature, whose deep mourning made her look far paler and even more distinguished than usual, standing alone on the platform. Dorothy had made up her mind that Michael, like most men who are deeply in love, had gifted the girl with all sorts of mental attributes to match her beauty. It had been evident to the keen-witted spinster, from the adoring way in which her father had spoken of Ruth, that she was a spoiled child. Now her quiet dignity and repose of manner greatly impressed Dorothy, because these attributes came to her almost as a surprise. She felt at once the superiority of this singularly beautiful woman, and she was more than ever mystified at the strangeness of the relations that existed between Michael and his wife.

Dorothy looked affectionately at her new sister, and Ruth, who had not expected to like her, was pleased and touched. As they walked along together Dorothy began to speak so kindly and regretfully of

Philip Bryant that Ruth's aching heart opened at once to her. When they reached the cottage, and she had placed her visitor on a sofa in the parlor, she bent over her and kissed her.

"It was very good of you to come," she said. "I am very glad to see you."

"Thank you," Dorothy said simply, but she felt instinctively that her brother's wife would not have made this advance unless she wished them to be friends.

They talked at first of Dorothy's journey, and then of Michael's movements. The devoted sister was inclined to resent Ruth's ignorance on the subject of her husband's projected journey; it seemed to Dorothy that Michael must have mentioned it when he wrote, and that his wife did not take sufficient interest in him and his affairs. Then, as she looked into the girl's sweet, sad eyes, she remembered how recent her sorrow for her father was, and how much allowance should be made for her.

The proof that Michael understood both his wife and his sister was that when Ruth that night had taken an affectionate leave of her visitor she wondered how she had been able to bear the intense loneliness of the last few days. She recognized in Dorothy a sympathetic yet steadfast nature, to which she felt inclined to cling for help in her sorrow; and she looked forward to a happy time with her. Ruth had longed to send for her aunt, but the feeling of her utter dependence on Michael had checked this wish. Now it seemed to her that Miss Clifford was safer than any one else, even if she did suspect that something was wrong between husband and wife.

She was Michael's sister, and for his sake Dorothy would be discreet. She certainly would not be inclined, as her aunt would have been, to consider Michael a negligent husband."

After breakfast they went down together to the little bay. Dorothy was charmed with the delicious air. She liked the quiet of the place; she also said she liked the cottage.

"In fact," she went on, with a mischievous light in her eyes, "so far as I have seen there's only one thing about the place I don't like; I mean your sour-faced landlady. You must be very sweet-tempered to have borne so long with her. Does she always scowl as she did this morning?"

Ruth smiled.

"I fancy she looked crosser than usual because you are a stranger; the poor woman is very shy. I think she does not like me, though I do not know how I have offended her. She liked my dear father, and she was very attentive to him; so I used not to mind her frowns; they have never troubled me much; I suppose I am not observing," she said simply.

Dorothy looked hard at her companion. Her insight into character was keener than Ruth's was, and she had had more scope for its exercise; her temperament also was far more nervous and sensitive.

"You look as if you had always been healthy, dear Ruth," she said brightly. She had seen the girl's eyes fill with tears when she spoke of her father, and she felt that she must cheer her. "You healthy people who can spend hours in taking in fresh air and sunshine hardly know, perhaps, how much you owe to such outward helps in the way of calmness and

cheerfulness. You look as if you were made of sunshine, and were hardly ever cross; and that is such a blessing. You and Michael are admirably suited; you will never worry him."

She sighed as she remembered her occasional irritable fits, and the patience her brother had shown. Ruth did not answer; she sat looking out over the sea.

"Now that I have seen you," Dorothy went on, "I shall be so glad to think of you settled in the old Purley House. You will be glad now when this exile is over, and you can be with Michael always."

"I have been very happy here, you know," Ruth said.

Dorothy gently stroked the hand that lay near hers.

"You have been very good and very patient in bearing this separation, but you do not yet know as I do the happiness of living with Michael. The entire trust one feels in him is so restful! It seems a part of his nature to put full trust in others, and to inspire them to trust him. I used to say to him that when I felt most wretched and weak and irritable he could always calm me—the very sight of his steadfast face was enough; and then, one knows that his is not the goodness of mere stupidity; I have seen him very angry indeed when anger was needful."

"Yes," Ruth spoke as if her thoughts were far away. She gave a long, shivering sigh.

"I ought to apologize," Dorothy smiled as she spoke, "for troubling you with my ideas about Michael, when of course you love him as well as I do. I am not quixotic, so I shan't say you love him

better; but you cannot think how I enjoy talking about my brother to you, because I know his praises must interest you."

Ruth had flushed with embarrassment.

"Have you always lived together?" she asked.

"Ever since Michael left school he and I have always kept house together. I used to live with my godmother, who spoiled me and left me a little independence. I dare say Michael has told you how soon our father and mother followed one another. David was away in Scotland when they died, learning to be a lawyer; and Michael became my charge. He never gave me a day's trouble. I think you have a very happy life before you, Ruth."

The girl started up. She did not see Dorothy's appealing glance; she was beckoning to Watty, who suddenly, and as Ruth thought most fortunately, appeared on the beach. He had been standing there a minute before he was observed, and when he saw that Mrs. Clifford had a companion he began very gently to retreat, in the hope of escaping unobserved.

"Come here, Watty," Ruth said. "Here's a new friend for you. This is my sister, Miss Clifford."

Watty eyed Dorothy inquisitively; then, apparently satisfied with what he saw, he drew nearer and held out his tiny hand, as if to welcome her to Dolmouth.

"Is you come to live here for always?" he inquired, his eyes sparkling with excitement.

Dorothy kissed the little hand she held.

"I am come for a little while, as long as my sister wants me."

She had evidently impressed Watty favorably.

He seated himself close beside her and looked up into her smiling face.

"Does you know some stories what she doesn't know?" he said in a confidential tone.

Ruth laughed and sat down by him.

"O Watty!" she said, laughing, "to think of your deserting an old friend for a new acquaintance! You little turn-coat! But I can't let you tire Miss Clifford. If she is kind enough to tell you one story you must remember she is not as strong as I am."

"As strong as you!" he whistled. "Why, you never gets tired; you likes telling stories. When we's married you shall tell me stories all day long, 'cept when I'm at school. She's going to be my wife," he said to Dorothy.

Dorothy put her arm round the little fellow and drew him close to her.

"You had better take me for a wife, Watty," she said. "I'm nearer your size. My sister is too tall for you. Besides, she has one husband already."

Watty wriggled himself away from her, and stood in front of Ruth, his legs planted widely apart, and looking very determined.

"Why didn't you tell me you was married?" His little voice was full of reproach. "You never told me so, nor showed me your husband, nor nothing." Then, with sudden eagerness, "I say! was that gemper your husband—the gemper 'at came round the point and stayed such a time with you on the beach when I took uncle the message?"

Ruth looked very pale; she rose up suddenly from the shingle.

"It is too cold for you sitting here; I am sure it is,

Dorothy. Watty, see if you can find some oyster-shells, and we'll show Aunt Dorothy how to play 'Dick, Duck, Drake.' "

Oyster-shells proved to be scarce this morning. Dorothy said she was afraid to sit still any longer, though the air felt to her so much milder than it had been at Dalgarno that she could hardly fancy it was still January. Ruth helped her sister-in-law up the steep, rough shingle. When they reached the meadow they saw Watty's nurse coming to seek her charge. The two ladies walked in silence to the cottage.

Ruth was very angry with herself. Her silence, she felt, must have led her sister-in-law to believe that the child had seen Michael with her on the beach. She had already gathered from a chance remark that Dorothy had been kept in complete ignorance of her estrangement from Michael. She could not confess the truth. She had no right to speak of her acquaintance with Mr. Bevington to her sister-in-law; that was Michael's secret quite as much as it was hers.

Dorothy, meanwhile, had received a shock. She felt that the illusion of her new relationship had lost its real appearance. "All is not gold that glitters," the keen-witted woman said to herself. It seemed to her that if the gentleman Watty spoke of had been Michael Ruth would not have been so evidently disturbed. She could not help remembering Mrs. Buchan's gossip about the pupil, but she fought loyally against her suspicions. She glanced at the girl's noble face as Ruth walked beside her, and she noted the deep sadness in her eyes. The brave little

woman said to herself that Ruth was Michael's wife and she would trust her. There might have been some folly in the girl's life, but there had not been sin. She was sure that Ruth was good and honest.

The weeks passed on. Ruth began to recover her spirits in her sister-in-law's bright companionship, and Dorothy grew every day fonder of her. She soon discovered that she could be useful to Ruth, and she began to help the girl with her French and to read German with her. There had been several heavy snow-falls, and even Ruth's love of the open air yielded to weather; and she welcomed this opportunity of study.

"It is like going back to old times," and she told Dorothy how she had gone to school with her grandfather. They soon found out a sympathy in books, and Dorothy loved to listen to the girl's pure, sweet singing.

One day Dorothy said impulsively, "Nothing fits you so well as singing, Ruth. You look like an angel while you sing."

Ruth had sat singing song after song. At this she abruptly left the pianoforte.

"Please do not say that. I am very unlike an angel. You will say so when you have known me a little longer."

There was a certain amount of vehemence in the girl's voice; it surprised Dorothy, and yet it fascinated her.

"My first reading was the true one," she said to herself. "I have been thinking lately she was cold and equable. I see she is just made for Michael; she has plenty of feeling, and yet I don't believe

she has as much love for him as she ought to have."

Dorothy sometimes thought that she had allowed this lovely creature to bewitch her. She had forgotten her resolution to be extremely wary and prudent in judging her young sister-in-law. The truth was that she had expected to find in Ruth a spirit of resistance, and instead of this the girl had lovingly welcomed her advice and assistance on many subjects, and had often deferred to her judgment. Dorothy had brought several books with her. Ruth had taken possession of one of these, and had made it her daily study.

"I wish I had had that book of yours years ago," the girl said when she rose up from singing. "I must buy it; I can never do without it again."

Dorothy looked at her affectionately.

"I will give it to you if you like it so much; not that copy," as Ruth kissed her and poured out her thanks; "Michael gave me that, and it is a dear old friend. He seems to like that book as much as you do."

Ruth turned away her head. It seemed as if Dorothy was always reminding her of the future she so much dreaded, and which she had been trying of late to forget.

The morning after this brought Ruth two letters, and she had been strangely silent since she read them. One was from her cousin Peggy Whishaw, reproaching Ruth for her continued silence; for she had not answered their letters of condolence at the time of her father's death. Peggy went on to say that her mother had been advised to go abroad, as

one of her lungs was said to be seriously affected. Peggy told her cousin they should start so soon there would be no time for any leave-taking, and that if she wished to answer her letter she had better write to her, "*Poste Restante, Bordighiera.*" Ruth felt strangely desolate while she read. If the worst came to the worst she had always felt that she could have a home with her aunt.

The other letter was from her husband, and its contents perplexed her. Michael asked her in the formal manner he had adopted how she and Dorothy got on together, and whether the air of Dolmouth suited his sister? He seemed, Ruth thought, polite but utterly indifferent. He also asked, still in the same way, whether she wished to stay on at Dolmouth till his return, or whether in the event of the house being ready to receive her she would prefer to go with his sister to Purley? Ruth had been arguing with herself ever since she read the letter. She wished that Michael had left her in peace. She was sure that she could never be a good wife to him as long as she felt a fraction of love for Reginald Bevington. She tried hard not to allow herself to think of her young lover, but, for all that, now and then a vivid memory of the effect the sudden sight of him had created flashed into her mind with solemn warning. How would it be if fancying herself reconciled to the idea of living with Michael she were to go home to Purley, and then just a chance meeting with Reginald should make her loathe her husband and long to leave him?

Ruth had learned much more about herself since she had known Dorothy. She had discovered the

startling fact that mere resolution will not avail to stem the tide of self-will, any more than a mere barrier set in the sand avails to break the force of the incoming waves, unless it be deeply sunk, and strongly guarded by other support than its own strength. Ruth had been saying her prayers all her life, but it seemed to her that till she knew Dorothy she had, with few exceptions, said her prayers formally—only as an act of duty. She had not gone to them for comfort and for help, with a sure belief that she should find both if comfort were good for her.

She had not heard from Mr. Bevington since her father's death. He had answered Philip Bryant's letter of refusal, but she did not know what he had written. Her father had put the letter in the fire, and had had the reticence not to speak of it. Ruth had hoped that after a while Mr. Bevington would cure of his infatuation, and that then he would marry. At least she had told herself she hoped this; but this morning, after she had read Michael's letter, she had been greatly disturbed. She had seen in the newspaper that the engagement between Mr. Bevington and Miss Stretton was renewed, and that the marriage was to take place after Easter. The pain she suffered at this news warned Ruth that her love had not yet received its death blow.

When she and Dorothy came in from their usual ramble by the sea Ruth had excused herself from her French reading. She had, she said, to put her accounts to settle; and she had sat by herself in almost complete silence, adding up columns of figures, without paying much attention to the results. She

felt utterly unhinged, discontented with herself, because she did not feel glad at what she knew was likely to prove her best safeguard. Now and then she wondered whether Dorothy had seen the announcement, and whether she knew anything about Mr. Bevington.

The days were so short—and Dorothy was afraid of being out late—that they went out again as soon as lunch was over, and dined in the evening.

To-day, just as they were ready to start, Mrs. Rimell opened the door herself, and, with what seemed to Dorothy a stinging distinctness of tone, announced, "A gentleman for Mrs. Clifford."

Dorothy looked up in joyful expectation of seeing her brother, and she recognized Mr. Bevington. She had often seen him ride through Purley, but had never till now had a near view of him. She was greatly impressed by his good looks, and by his easy grace of manner.

Ruth had risen, and she stood pale and silent, her eyes fixed on him.

He looked at Dorothy and bowed as he spoke.

"I am afraid I am an intruder," he said in his sweet, courteous voice, "but I have come to see Mrs. Clifford on business." Then he turned to Ruth and said stiffly, "May I ask to see you alone?"

Before Ruth could speak Dorothy bowed and left the room. There seemed no other course open to her.

There was a slight pause; then Ruth moved toward the door to follow Dorothy. He placed himself in her way.

"Please stay!" he said gently. "I will not keep you long. Your reception has already taught me

that I am an intruder." The increasing sadness in his voice softened her. "I have longed to see you to assure you of my sympathy." He paused, looking at her as if his eyes could not satisfy themselves with the sight of her loveliness. "I felt deeply the loss of my dear old friend. It would have been kinder if you had let me see him once more." Ruth turned away at this, and he went on: "But I have another purpose in coming to-day; won't you sit down and listen to me?" She shook her head and remained standing. "You are all alone now, dearest Ruth; you have no one to study but yourself, and I have come to ask you to decide my future life. I put it in your hands. Think well before you answer." He paused again, but Ruth seemed deaf. She remained standing quite still; she did not look at him. He went on in a passionate tone, "You do not even listen, Ruth; you are too unkind!"

At this she raised her eyes, but she did not speak; she seemed stupefied.

"You have seen or heard—such news always travels fast—that I am going to marry Miss Stretton. It is for you to decide whether I shall do so."

"I!" she said faintly, as if the word uttered itself against her will.

"Yes, only you can decide my life for me. Promise to join your life to mine! There shall be no trouble, no scandal. I will take you away from England. We will live where no one knows us; and, darling, I will make you the happiest woman in the world."

His words had poured themselves out so rapidly that she could not stop them. Her silence had so

encouraged him that, though he had come for the purpose of saying this, his own daring had surprised him. On his way he had decided to be extremely slow and cautious, so as to avoid alarming her; as he ended he took her hand.

She flung it from her with a violence that surprised him.

"I want to understand," she said in a hard, set voice, "whether this lady loves you?"

"I believe so, but what can that matter to us? I have vexed you by my abrupt proposal. Darling, I love you! You know how I love you, and you will forgive me!"

She looked at him haughtily, with sparkling eyes.

"You should ask Miss Stretton to forgive you. How dared you win her love and promise to marry her, and then come to me?" Her words seemed to choke her; she stood gasping for breath, her eyes still fixed on his face. His terror lest he should lose her robbed him of all restraint.

"I don't care," he said excitedly; "I will marry her if you think I ought to keep my promise, but that need make little difference to us. My darling, you will never refuse to make me happy?" Ruth put out her hand to stop the passionate entreaty of his words; her eyes flamed with anger and her cheeks glowed; all the strength of her nature had risen in protest against him.

"Go!" she said, "go at once! or I may say out too plainly what I think of you."

Her determined manner cowed him, but he thought she looked more beautiful than ever.

"You are perhaps afraid of your duenna," he said,

with a vexed laugh, "but really, Ruth, it is too late to try heroics with me; I understand you too well for that. You will cool down, sweet one, and then you will wish you had not sent me away. I will come at once, no matter when you send for me."

"Go!" she said sternly. She rang the bell.

"What! not even your hand?" he said as she turned away. "I did not think you were so hard-hearted."

Ruth was quivering from head to foot, and when Mrs. Rimell opened the door her lodger's flushed face excited the landlady's curiosity.

She had been upstairs with Miss Clifford; and now, as she opened the street door for the visitor and then closed it behind him, she blew her nose with some vehemence, and smiled as she thought over this choice bit of news for her evening chat with Miss Tabitha Stamper.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

It had been evident to the landlady that the visitor was not a friend of Miss Clifford's, for she had heard Dorothy go upstairs directly after his arrival. Besides, the gentleman had only asked for Mrs. Clifford. He had said, "You can say a gentleman for Mrs. Clifford." Mrs. Rimell was anxious to know what Miss Clifford thought of this gentleman, and whether she considered him a suitable visitor for her beautiful young sister-in-law. It occurred to the careful landlady that she ought to inquire whether the gentleman would stay to dinner, and that probably Miss Clifford would be able to tell her. It was a feeble excuse for intrusion, but Mrs. Rimell had dignified her greedy curiosity about her lodger's affairs by the name of conscience. She told herself that it was her duty to relieve herself of responsibility by passing on her doubts of Ruth to one so nearly connected with the delinquent as Miss Clifford was; so she went up and knocked at Dorothy's door.

Miss Clifford looked surprised when she opened it, and she frowned when she heard the landlady's question.

"Certainly not," she answered with decision. "The gentleman has only come on business."

Mrs. Rimell gave a doubtful, unpleasant smile. She liked Miss Clifford, but she did not choose to be snubbed without taking her revenge.

"I'm sure I beg pardon, ma'am, but the gentleman has been here before; and Mrs. Clifford seems so partial to him, I thought she would ask him to stay."

Dorothy had been annoyed as she thought over Mr. Bevington's visit, and now her vexation turned on the landlady. It seemed to her that Mrs. Rimell had spoken spitefully. She took up the book she had put down at Mrs. Rimell's entrance, by way of dismissing her, but the woman was bent on mischief.

"You see, ma'am," she went on in her monotonous, crushed voice, "in my position I see and hear and say nothing, so as not to get into trouble or give offence; but I have got a conscience, Miss Clifford, and, if you'll believe me, till you spoke just now I had tried to persuade myself that those two were cousins, or some sort of relations, that had a right to be so fond of one another."

Dorothy gave a surprised stare, but Mrs. Rimell returned her glance in a humble, ill-used way, as if conscious that her efforts at service were not yet appreciated.

"I do not understand you," Dorothy said impulsively, and then wished to recall her words, but it was too late. The landlady's face smoothed with an expression of relief as she answered:

"Don't you, ma'am? Then I'll make my meaning plainer. You see, ma'am, you, being the sister of Mrs. Clifford's husband, wouldn't, so to say, be likely to fancy that anything could be amiss." This was meant for a dig at Dorothy, who, Mrs. Rimell considered, had allowed herself to be got over by her handsome sister-in-law, and had regularly spoiled the girl. "I don't mean, ma'am, to say as there's

anything wrong—dear me, no! but what I mean is, a showy-looking lady is bound to be more cautious than a plain one— isn't she, ma'am?—because she attracts more notice. You know, ma'am, people will talk when they see a young swell like that alone with her on the beach, and so on, when it's known she has a husband. You see, ma'am, I'd seen Mr. Clifford, your brother, ma'am; I knew fast enough this one wasn't the husband."

Dorothy's head seemed to spin while she listened, and her pride was deeply mortified that she had given this woman the opportunity of speaking against Ruth. It seemed to Dorothy that the landlady was in earnest, and that she felt it her duty to speak out; but the troubled sister felt that for Michael's sake she must shield Ruth from any possible scandal. She forced herself to smile at Mrs. Rimell, and thereby shocked that righteous-minded woman.

"I do not know all Mrs. Clifford's friends," she said with more stiffness than usual, "and therefore this gentleman is possibly an old friend of Mr. Bryant's; it is quite natural that he should come and see Mrs. Clifford. I am sure you mean well, Mrs. Rimell, but pray don't trouble yourself about this. There is no need. I am sorry you have made such a mistake."

Mrs. Rimell stared hard, but Dorothy was on guard; she looked perhaps rather contemptuous, but she did not seem troubled.

The landlady bent her head and opened the door; then she came back and closed it behind her.

"I ask pardon, ma'am, if I have been too free, but I have made no mistake. You see, ma'am, I watches and waits, and I've seen what I've seen."

This time Dorothy laughed.

"If I were you I wouldn't think myself infallible, Mrs. Rimell. That rule of yours to see and hear, and say nothing, is a safe one to stick to; and I'll tell you something I once heard a very good man say, 'Never believe anything you hear and only half of what you see.' "

She turned her back on the landlady, as if to show her that she considered the interview ended.

Left alone, Dorothy leaned back in her chair as cold and as white as a stone. Already the remembrance of the child's words had flashed on her. She remembered, too, how suddenly pale Ruth had grown that day on the beach, and how abruptly she had changed the subject. Dorothy hid her face in her hands. She had braved it out with Mrs. Rimell, but alone by herself she felt stupid with horror. She did not believe, she could not, that this girl whom she loved so dearly, quite as much for herself as because she was Michael's wife, had been unfaithful to her husband.

And then the very thought of Michael set Dorothy's anger in a flame against him. What had he been about? Why had he left this attractive young creature all these dreary weeks alone in this dull place? It was plain that there had been an attachment between the pupil and Ruth, but now that she had seen the girl Dorothy considered the fact of such an attachment with different eyes. The poor child had fallen in love with this good-looking young fellow, and no doubt he was very fascinating. Seeing him every day, and living under the same roof, it really was not to be wondered at. Dorothy thought

it was wonderful that such a girl, with truth written on her face, could have brought herself to marry Michael while she still loved Mr. Bevington.

His visits to Dolmouth seemed to prove that she did really care for him. At this last reflection Dorothy's anger flamed up against Ruth. The girl had certainly, by word or look, never given his sister cause to believe that she cared for Michael, but Dorothy wondered how Ruth could have done such a wrong as to marry a man whom almost any girl would have been glad to accept, when she had no love to give him.

"Michael must have found it out," she thought, "and that caused the estrangement; but even then he might have put his pride in his pocket, and he might have won her in spite of herself. Don't tell me! Michael could win any girl he chose, if he only thought it worth his while. In this case he must think so, and I firmly believe he is faint-hearted because he considers himself inferior to that young sprig. Bless the dear fellow's heart! He loves Ruth, but he certainly don't understand her if he thinks a full grown woman like that could be satisfied with a mere boy. Young Bevington's only a boy; I could see it as I looked at him—a weak boy!"

She made all the excuse she could for Ruth, but she could not conquer the anger she felt toward her. She was Michael's wife, and she had no right to receive the visits of an old lover, especially when she was living away from her husband.

"Oh dear!" Dorothy felt oppressed and self-pitiful. "I shan't say a word to Michael; but it is plainly my duty to tell Ruth what I think. I—I'd sooner—"

well, never mind what I'd sooner do; I've got to do this. If we quarrel we shall have to part, I fancy; and that will trouble Michael."

There were sounds below; the street door opened and shut.

"I will wait," Dorothy thought; "she will surely come to me and explain this visit!"

She waited till she became so cold that she had to wrap herself in her fur cloak. At last she rose up and went downstairs.

"It is the hardest thing I was ever called on to do," she said, "but it is for Michael and I must do it."

CHAPTER XXXV.

It was a clear, frosty morning. There had been hoar frost earlier, and the hedge twigs glistened like silver. As Ruth took the road leading to Little Marshfield, every blade of grass beside the way seemed doubled in size by its sparkling white covering.

Ruth had left the train at the station about a mile beyond Little Marshfield; she was going to ask Sally Voce to take her in, but she did not wish to be seen at Church-Marshfield; and in this little village she knew no one except her mother's old servant.

Dorothy had asked her to account for her acquaintance with Mr. Bevington, and she had refused to answer Dorothy's questions; they had quarrelled and had agreed to part. Dorothy had advised Ruth to put herself under her aunt's protection until Michael came back from his Austrian journey.

Dorothy added that as she was going back to Scotland she could leave Dolmouth at the same time. Ruth had not had time to think since she parted from Mr. Bevington. The shock of his baseness had made her callous to other feelings. She remembered dimly that her aunt must have started, and that she could not go to her; but to her it did not matter what became of her; she longed to get away and hide herself. When Dorothy assured her that she should not mention Mr. Bevington's visit to Michael, Ruth answered haughtily that she was free to speak of it

to whomsoever she pleased. "Your opinion, or any one's opinion, on the subject is completely indifferent to me," the unhappy girl said.

She had left Dolmouth with Dorothy, and they had travelled together in silence till they reached the junction where Miss Clifford had to change. Ruth remained cold and hard, even at parting. She was in a sort of dumb despair. The last illusion of her love had been torn from her, but for the present she could not even think. At last she began to consider her plans. She had been travelling for several hours, and she knew she was a long way north of Little Marshfield. Before she left Dolmouth she had thought of going to Sally Voce, though it had seemed unnecessary to say so to her sister-in-law. She had taken her ticket to Lancaster, but she decided to leave the train at the next station and try to get back that night. She soon found that this was impossible, so she dined at this large station, and then waited for the night-train.

She had been travelling a good part of the night, and she looked very forlorn and dejected as she walked along the ice-bound road. Dorothy had doubted her, and had therefore, she considered, no right to her confidence; but Ruth had resolved that she would have no more secrets from her husband, and she had begun a letter to him last night while she waited for the train.

Her heart beat quickly, as one after another she recognized familiar landmarks. She had not often walked so far out as this, but she had often driven her father along this road on their way from New-bridge.

She had left her luggage at the station till she should send for it. She carried a good-sized bag, with the things she needed for daily use.

Though she had been so much indulged and cared for, Ruth was never helpless; and since she went to Dolmouth her self-dependence had largely developed. And now as she walked along she wished she could find some means of living without being so wholly dependent on her husband. This dependence galled her; she could not make any return to Michael for the goodness he had shown to her and to her father. It galled her more than ever now that she was better able to consider her treatment of him from his point of view. It might have been different, she thought, if he had forgiven her; then she could have asked him to pardon her and to let her try to show her penitence. But his last letter had made her feel that she was still unforgiven. Michael had been very liberal to her, and since her father's death she had tried to save; so that she had sufficient money to carry her on for some months, supposing that her letter should fail to reach her husband. She had directed Mrs. Rimell to forward any letter that might come for her to the old house in Broad Street.

A few steps farther brought her in sight of the two inns. Their signboards were creaking as though the brisk, cold air affected their joints with rheumatic twinges. At the opening of the lane the little brook was sparkling and babbling merrily, though its further side, under the shade of the thick-growing hedge, was still encumbered with dull, broken ice-flakes. Ruth looked on to the left, and her face cleared when

she saw a thin gray spiral of smoke going lazily up from Mrs. Voce's chimney.

The girl smiled, and she sighed with desperate resignation. She knew she should have to listen to many a sermon from Sally on the subject of being away from her husband. She also knew that she should be tormented by the old woman's questions; but then, if Sally was inquisitive, she was not a chatter-box; she would not gossip about her young mistress' troubles.

"I shall feel at home with Sally," the girl thought, as she opened the little gate. For a moment it seemed to Ruth as if her troubles had slipped away, and that she was again a child, petted and cared for by the old servant.

The little front garden looked bare, but it was free from weeds and litter. There was a plot of Scotch kale, a rather brown and nipped colony of pot-herbs, and a vigorous growth of horseradish. At the sound of footsteps on the slaty path a little boy came to the door and stood there whittling a stout stick with a knife.

"Why, George! is that you? How you have grown!" Ruth cried out, thinking what a contrast the strongly-built, red-cheeked, coarse-looking boy made to delicate little Watty, who had cried and clung round her neck when she said good-by to him.

George looked at her insolently. He hitched up one of his broad shoulders, his head being already a good deal sunk between them.

"Don't know yer," he said roughly. "You haven't no call to come in grandmother's garden."

The door opened more widely, and Sally peered from behind it.

She reddened at sight of Ruth, but she came forward with a forced smile on her broad face. Sally always grew fatter in winter, because she lived more in-doors. Her eyes seemed to be mere slits, as she fixed them on the girl.

"How do you do, Sally? I want you to take me in for a few weeks."

The old woman's face darkened; her eyes became shifty and restless. She had been carefully noting Ruth's tired face, her drooping eyelids and loosened hair, also the want of freshness and daintiness she had been used to see in her; and she mentally decided that the stories that had reached her had been true.

She turned suddenly on George and gave him a slight cuff on the cheek.

"Get in with you!" she said. "Go and weed the back garden; 'tain't half done yet."

"Bother! I ain't goin' to be cuffed to it," the boy said rudely. "Matter o' that, it ain't much hurt you can do with that fat hand o' yourn. I moind yer tongue more'n yer hand, grandmother."

Sally took him by the collar, dragged him back into the house, and shut the door upon him.

"I beg pardon, Miss Ruth—I forget myself—Mrs. Clifford, I should say, but I was took unawares, not expecting to see you. Bless you, ma'am, I've got the house full, every corner of it. I've got Lucy and her boy, both of 'em; and she, poor gal, that ill that I havn't a minute to call my own; she needs so much 'tendance, she do. I'm sure I'm very sorry, more

sorry that you should be asking for a lodging in a poor place like this, ma'am."

Ruth had expected this remonstrance, and she smiled.

There's no help for it, Sally, till Mr. Clifford comes back from abroad. Miss Clifford and I have been staying together at the sea, but now she has gone home again to her eldest brother, and my own home at Purley"—the words sounded strange to her as she said them—"is still in the hands of work-people."

Sally tried to look sympathetic, but felt unbelieving. She knew fast enough there was some good reason for this separation between husband and wife. She had had her suspicions at Appledore, and she had been told on good authority that Mr. Clifford had not started on this last foreign journey till after Mr. Bryant's death; and it would have been only natural if he had taken his wife with him, unless he had something against her. Sally decided that if a side must be taken in this business, she should stick by Mr. Clifford. He had done her many a good turn, and no doubt would do her many another; she was not going to take his wife's part against him.

Her continued silence surprised Ruth. The girl held herself very erect as she spoke.

"If you cannot take me in to sleep, Sally, I fancy you can get a bed for me in the village, and I can board with you."

Sally looked solemn, and shook her large head.

"You couldn't think of doing such a thing, ma'am! Only fancy what Mr. Clifford would say, and how you would set people talking! Why, ma'am, shouldn't you go and stay at the Church-Marshfield

Hotel? I'll get a lad to carry your bag; it's a deal too heavy for you, ma'am."

Ruth looked the woman direct in the eyes, and Sally's fell under the masterful glance. Ruth was very angry, but she knew it was wiser not to quarrel with Sally.

"I don't know what Mr. Clifford would say to such advice as that, Sally. Fancy my going to a hotel by myself! That would certainly set people talking, and now that I am alone I do not wish to go among strangers. I wanted to come to you so that I might be as private and retired as possible. Can't you think of a neighbor who can let me have a couple of rooms?"

Sally's small eyes blinked; she began to fear she had made a mistake. If Mrs. Clifford was, as she had been told, cast off by her husband, she would, the old woman fancied, hardly dare to speak in this way. For all that, Sally would not alter her determination. She had said she would not be mixed up in this affair of Mrs. Clifford's, and she meant it. She did not want to quarrel with Miss Ruth, but she must get rid of her the best way she could.

"There ain't nobody here, ma'am, as have got a fit place for you to set down in. If Lucy, now, weren't such a poor ailing creetur—only half alive, one might say—I'd turn her out to make room for you; but Lor', there! I know you wouldn't hear of such doings, ma'am. I did hear as George Bird had a room to spare and was wanting a lodger, but that was maybe seven weeks ago; and since then I haven't heard a word from Appledore. The new tenant had fallen ill when last I heard, and there was a talk of his giving up the farm to the owner."

Ruth's heart fluttered so that she could hardly speak. She had thought of going over one day to have a look at the old place, but the idea of being able to live close to it had not occurred to her.

"Very well, I will go on there at once," she said; "I dare say it will do, perhaps. Sally, you will manage to send my bag over to Appledore before evening. I expect I shall do very well with the Birds."

Ruth had inward qualms as she thought of Mrs. Bird's shiftless ways and her unruly children. She knew, however, that the woman was clean, and she hoped she should be able to put up with the accommodations.

"Good-by, Sally!" she said; "don't forget the bag."

Sally's face broadened into a smile, and she became suddenly hospitable.

"Lord sake, Miss Ruth! you wouldn't put such a slight on me as not to eat or drink in the place afore you sets on walking again! Come in, do 'ee now, ma'am, and rest ye a bit. We'll be gettin' dinner in a hour or so."

Ruth shook her head.

"No, thank you, Sally, I'll not have anything; I'll go on at once. I'll rest when I get to the end of my journey. Good-day! I hope Lucy will be better."

Ruth hardly waited for the old woman's assurance that the bag should be at Appledore almost as soon as she would; she hurried to the gate, and went down beside the sparkling water till she once more reached the road.

And then, when she was quite out of sight of the

village and could see only the hard, white road before her, with its stiff hedges on either side, Ruth broke down and cried bitterly. She shed perhaps the bitterest tears of her young life. She had thought Sally Voce inquisitive, and she had sometimes feared that the woman preferred rich people; but Ruth had never thought that the old servant would prove ungrateful to those whose bread she had eaten, and who had done so much for her in her troubled days. The girl knew that her father had urged Mr. Stokesay to make a certain provision for his housekeeper.

"I will not think of her" [she wiped her tears roughly away]. "Trouble seems to be following me. I suppose Dorothy will think I deserved it. I dare say I do, but that does not make it easier to bear."

She presently felt so tired that she sat down on a heap of stones beside the road. She had bought some sandwiches at the last town the train stopped at, and she began to eat these while she rested. A lark was singing blithely overhead, as if he thought it a cheerful sight to contemplate this weary, tear-stained face. Ruth looked up, but she could not at first see him against the fleecy clouds overhead. She noticed the buds on the hedge, and wondered whether they would be checked later on. She sighed.

"It will be a long time before I can feel hopeful," she said. "I could not have eaten at Sally's; I felt too wretched. I believe her bread would have choked me."

She felt very tired when she rose up to resume her walk. The way seemed longer than usual; yet as she went on the old familiar landmarks soothed her.

She felt at home again as she recognized Farmer Jones' gate, which her father had once dared her to climb when she was a tiny girl; and there was Mrs. White's larch shrubbery, with its as yet unfolded tassels of blossom. How well she remembered Mrs. White, and the huge slices of seed-cake the kind woman used to give her!

"I wonder who has the place now," she thought.

By the time she reached Church-Marshfield every one was at dinner. Smoke was going up from most of the chimneys, and savory smells floated out into the air as she passed the few houses that lay between her and Appledore.

It seemed to Ruth as she walked along that the road was peopled with ghosts; her father was there, and her mother, and her grandfather. As she passed his deserted cottage she hardly dared to look at the masses of red berries on its dusty front, she so strongly expected to see the old scholar standing at the gate watching for her in his long-skirted robe. Michael's face came among these phantoms. She remembered how much her grandfather had liked to talk to him, and how more than once Mr. Stokesay had told her she might read any book that Mr. Clifford lent her, because his taste might be trusted. Her own early thoughts and fancies came back in a crowd from those past years; the road seemed to reveal fresh ones, till now forgotten, with every turn it took. She remembered Michael's constant visits, and how she used to look forward to them. Her Cousin Peggy had even joked her about her frequent mention of Mr. Clifford in her letters.

"If he had asked me then," she said; "before I

knew anything about love, I believe I should have said 'yes' cheerfully."

It was not the first time this remembrance had come to Ruth; she had thought of it before she decided to accept Michael; but at that time she had told herself that nothing in the world could make her sorry that she had been loved by Reginald Bevington; his love had then seemed a possession to be thankful for; she should never have known the real happiness of love if he had not come to Appledore. These thoughts stung her as she walked. A cloud had settled on the vision that had seemed so bright; it was more than a cloud. Ruth felt with a shiver that there was a smear on the memory of her love. Every day since his last visit to Dolmouth the unhappy girl's conviction had become stronger that Mr. Bevington had never been honest in his professions; he had meant her ruin, not her happiness. His ideas of love and hers were, she now knew, as opposite as light and darkness. And yet, although she had tried to think the worst of him, she did not hate him; she excused him on the ground of her own blind weakness. In her utter ignorance she had led him to believe that his love was welcome, when it had been only an insult. It was, perhaps, natural that she should not make allowance for his weakness. It seemed to her that he had never thought of her as his future wife.

She had reached the gate that led to the Mill Valley, and she hurried past it with a shudder at her own heedless folly. A few minutes later she was looking down from the road across the home mead

on to the moss-crowned tiles and the twisted chimney-stacks of Appledore Farm.

Ruth's eyes filled till her sight was completely dimmed. She wondered whether trouble would meet her here again, and whether the Birds would prove themselves as inhospitable as Sally Voce had been. Hitherto she had only met a couple of tramps, male and female, on the road; and the man had such an unpleasant leer as he looked at her that Ruth thought she would smooth her hair and straighten the set of her hat before she presented herself to the Birds. The thorn-bush at the corner of the lane, which had often come in her way when she was watching for her father, now served as a welcome screen behind which she strove to tidy her hair and to remove all trace of disorder from her general appearance.

She could not remove the look of fatigue from her worn face, but she resumed the little veil which she had taken off when she quitted the train; she fancied that this screen would give her a married look and would impose on the Birds. Their cottage lay behind the farm-yard, and she had meant to go round by the road to the farm-entrance; but as she tried to pass the lane she found that instinctively her feet moved toward it; it was not far to the house, and she could easily come back again to the road. She reached the bottom of the lane and stood at the gate. The flower border was bare, except for a tuft of Christmas roses near the porch. Over the porch itself, and spreading over the adjacent house-wall, was a profusion of pale yellow jasmine blossom against the leafless green stems. Ruth looked up at

the windows; they were all closed except that of the bedroom over the porch. She looked quickly away; she remembered that had been Reginald Bevington's room.

All at once a sharp cry startled her. A child came running forward, stumbled and fell on his face on the rough gravel in front of the porch.

While Ruth hesitated whether she should open the gate and help the little frightened creature Mrs. Bird's head was put out of the porch-room window. Her frown indicated that she was going to scold the unlucky squaller, and then as her mouth opened, full of words, she recognized her young mistress, and she smiled with hearty satisfaction.

"Mercy on us!" she cried; "I'm proud to see 'ee, ma'am. To think o' that, now! Here, Gearge! Gearge! Where be 'ee, man? Coom here! coom quick, I tell 'ee! Here be Miss Bryant as was, Missus Clifford as is; an' she be a-standin' at the gate."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

GEORGE BIRD did not trouble his head about politics as much as many of his fellows did, but he must have had an unconscious and early belief in conservatism. He had lived on Appledore Farm from a boy of twelve, even then big-boned and strongly-made; and except that he had grown bigger and handsomer, the difference between a bull-calf and the full-grown animal, there had been no other change in him. He had put aside his "larnin'," as he called it, when he left school to begin farm-work. He never tried to read even the local newspaper, though his wife spelled it over diligently on Sunday evenings when the children were in bed. He rarely went beyond the farm, nor did he believe in any very modern improvement with respect to farming. That which had done for his father would do for him. The only matter that roused the big fellow out of his ordinary serenity was his dislike to new-fangled "nossions," as he called Mr. Clifford's advice on several points, chiefly of a sanitary nature, with regard to the care of the stock; for of late years, since Mr. Bryant's troubles and the consequent diminution of hands at the farm, George Bird had become a sort of Jack-of-all-trades, and everything was more or less in disorder.

The tenant who had succeeded Philip Bryant had been obnoxious to Bird. He was a young man full

of the last new ideas, having been educated at the Agricultural College. The hopeless state of the drainage and the ruinous condition of the fences and outbuildings at Appledore had so completely disenchanted him with the place that he soon gave notice to quit. He wrote to the absentee landlord that Appledore was not what it had been represented to be, and he threatened law proceedings unless the necessary improvements were either immediately made or a half year's exemption from rent was allowed him. The landlord was exploring in Central Africa, and the sleepy agent, who had neglected to inspect the place before he accepted this new tenant, thought it was safer to release him than to incur, till his employer returned, what might prove a serious outlay. He came over and told Bird that his wife must keep the house aired and clean till further orders. The tenant was extremely glad to be free of his bargain.

Susan Bird told her husband that the easiest way for her to do her duty by the house would be to move out of the cottage, which had already become too small for her yearly increasing brood, and to set up her household gods in the farmhouse. She had, however, been wise enough to occupy only the kitchens and the servants' bedrooms, and it had occurred to Bird, who highly approved his wife's happy idea, that he might make a few pounds if he could find a lodger to keep the best rooms aired through the winter.

He had gone on hoping to hear of an inmate, but without success. Mrs. Clifford's arrival had therefore seemed a special providence. It gave him a real excuse for remaining in his comfortable quarters.

Now and then he had felt a trifle uneasy lest the rector should hear of what had happened and call him to account for his residence in the farmhouse. He had more than once thought of writing to ask leave from the agent, but writing had always been a toil, and he was completely out of practice. He did not choose to ask a neighbor to write for him; that would at once betray that he was living at the farm without leave. So when Ruth came, and appeared to take it for granted that the agent had put Bird in possession till a new tenant could be found, his liking for his old master's daughter came back, with an added sense of indebtedness for the weekly payment she bestowed on his wife.

Susan Bird looked on her handsome husband as a sage, and she was quite of his opinion when he said that Mrs. Clifford was a very ill-used young lady in being left to go about and fend for herself. He did not take this or anything else to heart; it may be that in George Bird's composition heart had become an almost unknown quality. He was amiable, he thought his wife and children better than those of his neighbors, he was good-natured and fairly sober; but he loved money with a passion that absorbed other feelings.

To-day, as he stood in the farm-yard slowly chewing the bit of straw that rarely left his lips, the brilliant sunshine lighting up his tawny mass of hair and beard, so curly that the upper, thinner part shone like gold in the full light, while the tangle below made a rich brown background, he looked a fine specimen of an English peasant. So much of his face as showed under his broad-leaved straw hat

was vividly rich in color; his brown-red eyebrows went well with the rest, and as he stood facing the sunshine they came heavily down over his sleepy, very brown eyes.

He was proud of the notice Mrs. Clifford took of his children, and he liked to hear her talk. "She's got such a pleasant, cheery voice," he told Susan, "she makes a fellow feel all right by the way she speaks to him." He still considered her his mistress, and was willing to take orders from her, though he knew her connection with Appledore was at an end.

Something that was almost gratitude sounded in his voice as he answered the proposal Mrs. Clifford had just made.

"Ye're mottal kind, ma'am, I'm sure. 'Tis a change for the little lass, an' change is mostly what they looks fur. When I was a lad change, so to say, wasn't thought on. I hope as you finds Sukey dutiful and—and——" He paused to find words for what he wanted to say. "Askin' your pardon, ma'am, doesn't you think as gals does as well wi'out books as with 'em?"

Ruth laughed so heartily that he hung his head and looked bashful.

"Well, now," she said, "you're the last man, Bird, who ought to say that. See what a hard-working, good wife you have got, and yet she is fond of reading."

Bird grinned till he looked like a handsome satyr.

"I'll tell ye the secret o' that hard work, ma'am. Afore we was married Sue was allus too fond of readin', she wur; an' I saw it. She brought a store

o' books when she come to me, a dozen or more. Well, ma'am, one day when I knowed she were busy I up an' took they books—tales they was, and such—an' I chucked 'em on a heap o' stuff what the master was a-burnin' out yonder," he pointed to the hill behind the house. "They wasn't long burnin', ma'am," he ended with a chuckle.

Ruth looked very grave and severe.

"That was cruel. Sue had a right to be very angry."

He looked puzzled.

"Do'ee think that, ma'am? Mebbe ladies has time for readin' and so on, but not Sue. Bless her! she whined a bit, an' I says, 'look you here, my gal, I don't mean it onkind, but they books were a timptation. Don't 'ee read no books, 'cept the Bible o' Sundays, an' once a week I'll get 'ee a sight o' the newspaper.' "

Ruth turned her back on him; this eldest girl, Sukey, had become crippled since the Bryants had left Appledore, by a fall from a swing.

Sukey had met with this accident several weeks before Ruth's arrival. The child inherited her mother's love of reading, and she cried bitterly when she learned that she could never hope to go to school again. The doctor said her only chance of recovery was in lying stretched out flat for a year or more on the board with which the rector's kindness had provided her. A year seemed an eternity to Sukey, and she had turned her face to the wall and refused to be comforted.

Ruth had found in this afflicted child a true angel of peace.

After the first solitary evening spent in the old parlor, peopled by so many memories, and where even the old furniture helped to remind her of past joy and past suffering, Ruth had told herself that she could not stay at Appledore; she would not even finish the letter she had begun to her husband.

In the morning, she had gone into the house-place. Below the sunny window in which Ruth used to dry her herbs and rose petals lay poor, pale Sukey, who had been outwardly just such another embodiment of sunshine as her father, changed as it were from a flower into a stone, her pale face framed by her loose tawny-colored hair. Ruth was strongly impressed; she bent over the sick girl and kissed her.

Later in the day she said to Susan Bird, whose eyes filled with tears when she looked at her helpless child, "See here, Susan, I want to do something to help you. Can't you trust me with Sukey? I'll sit with her and try to cheer her up a bit while the others are at school."

Ruth had been doing this for several weeks past. The weather had been fine and had tempted her to take longer walks, but she had not neglected Sukey. The child's heavy eyes always brightened at the sight of her friend, and the treasures which Ruth brought in from her walks—a few wild blossoms, richly-colored leaves, sometimes a curious beetle, and once a sick chicken for Sukey to nurse back to health—all these novelties brought the breath of outside life to the weary girl and cheered her. At first Ruth had forced her own spirits for the sake of poor, fractious Sukey, who still at times complained loudly

about the hardship of her lot; but soon, and almost in spite of herself, Ruth's spirits rose again. The children, noisy as they were, amused her by their quaint ways as she played with them. She was growing more like the Ruth Bryant of her girlish days than she had been since she went away to nurse her Aunt Whishaw. She had found an object in life, some one to whom her care was really necessary, and who loved her.

This morning, Sukey had seemed so much better that her friend fancied she might begin to learn again. Ruth had discovered that the worst sting of Sukey's sorrow lay in the fact that her younger sisters would all pass her, and that she who had never yet lost a place should be left behind—"the dunce of the family."

Ruth looked over the child's school-books and found that a few new ones were needed, and when she heard that Bird was going into Newbridge she asked him to purchase these books for her, and thereby elicited his ideas on the subject of female schooling.

Ruth had written to her husband to announce her arrival at Appledore. In her letter she told him of Mr. Bevington's visit, and also of Dorothy's departure, but she did not tell him of his sister's suspicions. She had grown to think that she had judged Dorothy hardly, and that if she herself had been less proud Dorothy would not have gone away and left her alone. She had received one letter from Michael, which he addressed to Dolmouth. It was evident he had not heard from her. He wrote in some trouble;

the journey had taken far longer than he counted on, and now his friend had fallen ill at a small town on the Danube, where the accommodation was so second-rate that Michael could not possibly leave him behind. Of course the length of the delay would depend on his friend's recovery, but he said he could not reach England nearly as soon as he had hoped.

Ruth had little time now in which to feel dull or lonely. She had another charge besides Sukey. She had a good notion of cookery, and she was trying hard to improve Mrs. Bird's very primitive culinary methods. Ruth had a cookery-book, and she persuaded the woman that she would find it interesting, and useful too, to study this sometimes by way of change from the weekly newspaper to which she was so devoted; and as success in cookery is sure to bring its own reward, the poor woman soon grew delighted and surprised with her improved power of roasting and boiling, in place of the incessant stews to which she had hitherto doomed her husband and her children. Bird applauded the change by smacking his lips, when he came in from work, at the sight of his improved rations; but he shook his head at Susan's efforts at pastry making on the new lines.

"'Tis well enough, Sue," he said, with his mouth full of rhubarb pie, on the evening of his return from a second visit to Newbridge; "'tis all as should be for folks like Miss Ruth an' such as she, but gi' me paste as 'ull stan' a good bite. This sort o' trumpery goes nigh to melt as soon as 'tis in yer mouth; there beant no stay for the teeth in 't; 'twould suit the new married folk rarely."

He had been telling his wife during supper the

talk he had heard about Mr. Bevington's wedding, the bride's home, Stretton Castle, being only a few miles from the town.

"'Tis a splendid place, they do say, an' she a only child, a-rollin' in money. My word, our young gentleman have knowed how to take his pigs to a good market!" Bird sighed as he filled his pipe.

Susan sat meditating. In that June the year before last various little things had made her think that Mr. Bevington and Miss Ruth cared for one another. It was she who had talked about it to Sally Voce. It therefore seemed to her a fortunate piece of news that the gentleman had followed Mrs. Clifford's example and had taken a wife.

"I thought the weddin' was over," she said; "I don't read the paper as reg'lar as I used to, but I saw the marriage was goin' to be sooner than this."

"It wur so," he answered, without removing his pipe; "it were mebbe three weeks or more ago; 'tis an old story by now. 'Tis the comin' 'ome which has set 'em talkin' again; that is to be looked for sooner than was expected. Lord! there will be doin's!"

Susan cleared away the supper, washed up, and then sat down at the end of the long kitchen table to darn the family socks and stockings. Ruth had tried to teach the hard-worked mother that darning stockings was on the whole a more profitable occupation than knitting them.

While she sat drawing out her long needleful of gray worsted from one side to the other of a gaping hole Susan wondered whether Mrs. Clifford had heard

of the marriage, and whether it would not be kind to tell her about it.

Next morning when she took in breakfast to Ruth Mrs. Bird ventured to say she hoped the new-married folks would have it fine for their home-coming; had Mrs. Clifford heard that they were coming home on Saturday to Stretton Castle, and that old Mr. and Mrs. Bevington were coming there to meet their son and his bride?

"I hope the weather will be fine," Ruth said.

She was reading; she did not raise her eyes from her book, and poor simple Susan was left in doubt. Ruth had, however, seen the announcement of the marriage in the paper. For her own sake she had been relieved to see it; it freed her from all fear. Two letters from Mr. Bevington had followed her from Dolmouth, and she had destroyed them unopened; she feared if she sent them back the post-mark might betray her hiding-place. She was sorry for Mr. Bevington's wife, but then, she told herself, marriage might benefit him; he might become really attached to her, and begin a new course of life. She turned, however, from the thought as soon as possible. She felt sorry that Susan had recalled it.

The post had brought her another letter from her husband. He told her he had not yet heard from her, and that her silence made him anxious. He was more hopeful about his friend, and he said he might return sooner than he expected when he last wrote. If she had written to Vienna, as he had told her to do, he should find her letter there as he returned.

This letter had agitated Ruth. In the afternoon her

old friend the rector came to see her, and he rejoiced to hear her news.

"It is time your husband came home," he said. I do not like to think of you shut up alone with these uncouth people, though I can see you are a great help to them."

She smiled rather sadly.

"They are all I have left to care for now," she said. "Even my favorite cows have disappeared. Nothing is as it used to be at Appledore; yet I find life very tolerable here."

"You were never discontented, Ruth; you had a way of making the best of things at all times," he said, smiling. "I, on the contrary, sometimes find the rectory very dull. It will be a real charity if you will come in and lunch with me next Sunday," the kind old man added.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

RUTH's days were so full of occupation that they passed by more quickly than she had expected. She had not heard again from Michael, but a change had passed over her; it had come so gradually that she had hardly been conscious of its progress till she found herself one morning wishing for a letter from her husband, and became aware that she no longer shrank from his return. She told herself that she did not love him; she thought it was impossible to love twice in a lifetime, but she knew that if he would forgive her and take her for his wife she should be able to do her duty, and she hoped she might make him happy; that seemed to be the work that life held for her in the future.

The great obstacle between them was removed. She did not disguise from herself that she had gone on loving Reginald Bevington after her marriage to Michael; she could never forget it, but it was no longer a pleasant memory. There was no longer a struggle against it; it was a sad and shameful blot in her past. Her mind could not be tempted to linger on a time of which she felt so heartily ashamed. She was anxious on one point, though she strove to be resigned. Her husband's letters were cold and brief; it was possible that when he returned he might propose a separation. Ruth felt that she must abide by his decision; she had no right to appeal against it,

and she had resolved if it proved adverse to get the rector to put her in the way of educating herself for the post of a village school-mistress. She could not be dependent on Michael, unless she was his wife.

It was one of those March afternoons when the outside world looks the quintessence of brightness and the east wind cuts like a double-edged knife. Ruth came in shivering from her walk, though the scorching sunshine had flushed her face. She had brought in an abundance of wild primroses and wood-anemones for Sukey, and the child delighted to hold some of the cool, fresh stalks in her feverish hands, while Mrs. Clifford was filling saucers and soup-plates with the rest.

"They are lovely and sweet." The child pressed them to her lips, then came a deep sigh, "O ma'am! shall I never see them growing again?"

Her blue eyes swam with tears as she looked at Mrs. Clifford.

"I hope so, but I tell you what it is, Sukey," her friend said cheerfully: "to-day you've got to be very glad it was I who had to go out instead of you; the wind might have cut you into small bits. But I have really found a plan for you, and next time I see Dr. Buchan I'm going to talk to him about it. What do you think? You can have a little carriage—a sort of perambulator—and you and your board can be put on it, and then you can go as far as the wood. Isn't that a fine idea, eh?"

Sukey clasped her thin hands in a kind of ecstasy; she thanked Mrs. Clifford with tears in her eyes, but Ruth was not looking at her now; she had risen and was standing, listening with a look of horror in her

widely-opened eyes, while the flowers lay loosely between her fingers.

"Sukey"—she looked so troubled that the child stared in surprise—"if your father comes in and asks for me you must say I am gone out; I am going now."

"Won't you be tired, ma'am? and oh! won't you tell me more about the carriage what'll take me to the wood afore you goes?"

For the first time Mrs. Clifford turned abruptly away from her charge. She went out of the room even while Sukey was crying out to her that she had promised to set her a sum. Ruth paused when she reached the hall, and then instead of going out again she changed her mind and went softly upstairs. She crept quietly along the gallery, opened and closed her door with the utmost caution, and then she sat down to think.

She had heard Reginald Bevington's voice talking with Bird just outside the door of the house-place, and a sudden terror had seized her. At first she had felt strongly indignant, but on reflection she decided that he could not know she was at Appledore. She had not even written to tell Dorothy; she so greatly feared the news might leak out before Michael's return.

The only person who knew was the person who forwarded her letters from Purley, and she believed that must be Mr. Wood, for Dorothy had told her that in view of his numerous absences, so much more prolonged since his marriage, Michael had found it necessary to appoint Mr. Wood his manager. The young fellow had very little business

of his own, and had proved very useful. Dorothy had said that in the end he would probably become Michael's partner. Ruth thought it possible that Mr. Wood might have told Mr. Bevington where she was; and yet this was hardly likely, for when she wrote to ask Mr. Wood to forward her letters to Appledore, she had asked him not to give her new address to Dr. Buchan, or to any one likely to come out from Purley to see her; it was far more probable that Mr. Bevington, who would now doubtless have land of his own to see after, had come over to ask Bird a few-questions relative to farming matters, for with all his easy laziness Bird was considered a rare hand in the matter of seed-sowing, his luck therein being proverbial.

The girl was tempted to smile at her own self-conscious fear, but she could not shake off a sorrowful dread that Michael might hear of this visit and misconstrue it before he received the letter she had written him when she determined to remain at Appledore.

She could not keep still, and restlessness was such an unusual feeling that she yielded to the power with which it took possession of her. She felt that she must be a prisoner till Mr. Bevington had departed, and she crept into one of the empty bedrooms on the further side of the dark gallery, which looked on to the farm-yard. As she had expected, the lattice was closed. Ruth crept close to it and listened; he was still there. A sound of voices came up from below, but she could not distinguish them, as she could just now in the house-place. She took out her handkerchief, and rubbed away the dust from one of the

diamond-shaped panes. As she peered through it she suddenly drew back, so that she could see without any chance of being seen. Mr. Bevington had come out from the house and was crossing the farmyard, followed by George Bird.

Ruth looked across to the gate leading to the road, and she saw a boy there holding a horse. A feeling of relief came to her. If Mr. Bevington had meant his visit for her, he would have had his horse taken to the stable. It was evident, she thought, he had only come to ask a question or two of Bird, who had always been a favorite of his.

The two men were now standing still. All at once she saw Bevington put his hand in his pocket. He took a letter from it and gave it to Bird; then she saw him put money into Bird's ready palm and point to the letter he had given him.

The room seemed to go round with Ruth; a deadly sickness seized her, and she clung close to the bare wall against which she stood. She soon recovered herself; she was not afraid now, because she no longer feared herself. She knew that the shock which had for a moment mastered her had been caused by horror at the baseness of these two men. They were both seeking to betray her, and in these last weeks she had been telling herself how much more worthy of trust Bird was than Sally Voce—Sally, whose ingratitude and worldliness had for the time completely shaken the girl's belief in human nature.

Ruth knew that Mr. Bevington's home lay far away northward, so that she rejoiced when she saw him mount his horse and take the road toward Purley.

She waited till he had been for some time out of sight before she ventured into the garden. She felt a longing for air and space to quiet her indignant disgust. She paced up and down for some time, thinking of Mr. Bevington's behavior, till her face burned with shame, and her proud head sank forward with the weight of her humiliation. When at last she went back to Sukey, she saw, as she expected, a letter lying on the tidy-table which she had given the child to hold her books and flowers.

"See here, ma'am, I've got a present for you," the child said. "Father told me as I was only to let you see it. I was to hide it, he says, if mother comes in. You would like to have it private, father said, so I thought mebbe it were a valentine, come too late."

The child's inquisitive glance gave Ruth exquisite pain. At that moment her wrath burned hotly against George Bird—she even longed to lay a horse-whip across his shoulders. How dared he teach Sukey to keep a secret from her mother, and to make her inquisitive about other people's business!

She took up the letter, looked at the address, and then put it down on the table beside her, while she set Sukey the promised sum. As the line of pale gray figures grew under her fingers, Ruth told herself she could send back Mr. Bevington's letter without any fear of betraying her place of refuge. She would post it herself from Allmarshfield. She hoped, when he saw it had not been opened, he would cease his unmanly persecution. She went to the parlor, glad to get away from Sukey's watchful eyes; and then, tired as she was, she started for the little way-side post-box. As she returned, a new thought

came to her, and she went round by the farm-yard entrance.

She found Bird, as she expected, lounging about. Though he was not chewing a straw he was smoking a pipe, and he looked less sleepy than usual. He touched his hat when he saw her, and she fancied she saw a faint grin on his face. She frowned till her fair forehead was furrowed with lines. "Look here, George," she said sternly, "if you bring me any more letters, or if you have anything more to do with Mr. Bevington, I'll write to the agent, and I'll have you turned away from Appledore. I am in earnest, remember!"

She had reached the kitchen door before the astonished man recovered his surprise. She knew that he would not dare to follow her into his wife's domain, even if he wished to justify himself. But it was as much as she could do to stand chatting a minute or two with Susan, and then, avoiding the house-place, she went into the parlor.

She closed the door behind her, seated herself beside the hearth, and hid her face in her hands. Her head sank forward till she sat crouched together, her face hidden by the long, trembling fingers, almost touched her knees. How she had loved and trusted this man! Man? He was not worthy of the name! He was willing to betray a wife who trusted him and had enriched him, and he desired, if he could, to ruin another man's wife; yet she had loved him, and had counted his love a possession! Beside the figure of this poor, pitiful seducer, whose one aim in life, she told herself, had been that of self-pleasing, there rose up the image of her husband—her hus-

band as she had last seen him, flushed with righteous anger, yet with the nobility of truth in this very anger that had left an indelible memory. How could she hope that so pure and so lofty a mind as Michael's could forgive her for having set a dishonoring love before his earnest devotion! She could not hope for pardon; yet, humanly speaking, his protection and counsel were urgently necessary to her. At last she went to the writing-table, and wrote a letter to her husband on her knees. Something seemed to tell her that he was on his way home.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

MICHAEL was on his way home. He had determined to take his wife by surprise, and to see whether he could not end this miserable state of things, one way or the other. Far away from the associations connected with his past feelings, in the silent night-watches beside his friend's sick-bed, he had severely blamed himself for his treatment of Ruth. He had left her unprotected, exposed perhaps to temptation, at least to annoyance, and he burned with impatience to return.

On his way home, when he reached Vienna, he inquired at the post-office, and his wife's letter was handed to him. The date showed him that it had been lying there for weeks, though he had written for his letters more than once from the little town by the Danube. His impatience so increased as he read this letter that when he reached London he said good-by to his friend, and hurried on to Purley by the night-train.

Ruth had sent her last letter to Purley, and he found it waiting for him there.

He had felt very hungry on arriving, but when he had read this letter he pushed aside his breakfast and pulled out of his breast-pocket the much longer letter he had found waiting for him at Vienna. It began:

"MY DEAR HUSBAND: I told you, when I last

wrote, how much I liked Dorothy, and that I hoped she would stay here with me till your return. Dorothy has since then tired of Dolmouth; she asks me to tell you she is going back to Scotland, when she has paid a visit to her friend at Carlisle. I am so sure that I ought not to stay here alone that I am going to Sally Voce's. I will stay with her till I hear from you—whether you will join me there, or whether you wish me to meet you at Purley.”

Michael was even more impressed by the changed tone of this letter than he had been when he first read it at Vienna, it seemed to him so wife-like. Ruth's letters had been kind, but they might have been written by a friend who was wholly independent of her correspondent. This letter was written at intervals. It began at Dolmouth, then there was a bit from the railway station she had waited at. It went on again from Appledore in a changed tone: “I find it pleasant and peaceful here,” she wrote. “Sally said she had not room for me, and I am in the old house, as the tenant has given it up. I should like you to find me here when you come back—it would be like those old times when you were always so kind to me. Perhaps you have forgotten them, but I often think of them. If, however, you consider it better I should meet you in Purley, please send me word; it must, of course, be just as you wish.”

There was a good deal more in the way of inquiry about his journey, and Ruth added that she should not write again till she heard he had received this letter. Then came the bit which had so roused his impatience to reach England: “The reason why I am sure you would have wished me to leave Dol-

mouth is that Mr. Bevington came again to see me there. He had come twice while my father was with me, but he had been so strongly forbidden to come again, that I thought there was no chance he would. Believe me, Michael, I shrink from seeing him as much as you can wish. You will be glad to hear that it is said he will soon be married." This morning's letter was much shorter. It began:

"MY DEAR HUSBAND: I feel sure that you are on your way home. I send this letter to await your arrival. Can you forgive my long blindness, my hateful ingratitude? Will you trust me to try and make you happy? You cannot guess how anxiously I wait for your answer!

"YOUR RUTH."

She had not spoken of Mr. Bevington's last visit; she had felt as she wrote, that his name would poison the joy she should feel in Michael's pardon.

Michael Clifford had not even announced his arrival to Mr. Wood; he was all the better pleased to get off to Appledore before Mr. Wood was likely to appear at the office.

It was a lowering morning, and a good deal of comment was exercised by his neighbors in Broad Street on the subject of proceedings. Instead of following his long-established custom of leaving the town on horseback, he had actually sent to that most ancient hostlery, "The Prince of Wales," for a trap with a hood; had put therein one of his travelling-bags, just as it came up from the railway station, and had then driven away down Broad Street, and

under the low-browed archway that ends it, toward the bridge leading to the Appledore road. He had arrived so quietly in Purley—there being no cabs at that early hour at the station—that only his near neighbors had heard of his return. There had been few to notice his flushed face and its bright, expectant expression as he started.

Just before he came in sight of Appledore, at the end of his two hours' drive, he began to doubt his own wisdom. Surely his idea of taking Ruth by surprise had been boyish and foolish. Suppose he had been mistaken in the meaning of her words; suppose he had misread the penitence of her honest, generous nature, for the love which she could never feel for him! Only a loving woman, he thought, would be pleased to be thus taken by surprise. Perhaps he had made a mistake. If he had announced his arrival, he should have guessed in a moment from her first reception whether her feelings had really changed toward him. It was now too late to turn back, and indeed Michael was too much over-wrought to give up his purpose.

He drove round by the farm-yard, where he found George Bird with a bit of straw in his mouth, lounging against a post. It seemed to Mr. Clifford that the man was disturbed at seeing him, but his manner was unusually respectful. He said, in answer to Michael's question, that so far as he knew Mrs. Clifford was in. "She'll be mebbe in the house-place," he added.

Michael left him at the outer gate, so there was no one to warn Ruth of her husband's coming.

He opened the door that led into the farm-yard,

and he saw her. She started and turned pale as his tall figure filled up the opening. For a moment she sat still; then she rose from her chair, smiled timidly, and went to him with the both hands stretched out.

The sun had not shown himself that morning; the sky was still a lowering gray; yet to Michael the bare, big room seemed flooded with golden light—the glory of Ruth's loveliness. . . . He had a vague, dim vision of a small figure lying stretched out below the window, and of two blue eyes wildly staring at him; but he was only conscious of Ruth—that his arms were around her, and that her sweet eyes smiled at him as he pressed her closely to his heart and covered her blushing face with kisses.

He released her, drew her hand through his arm, and led the way to the parlor. It was very sweet to the girl to feel thus taken possession of, and she sat for some time in silence, resting her head on his shoulder, and wondering whether she were dreaming.

They had been sitting there a long time, with snatches of talk now and then. At last Ruth had drawn herself away, and she asked him to listen to her. Michael tried to stop her penitent confession, but he could not, and when she had ended there was another silence. He did not say one word of reproach—he took her in his arms and strained her tightly to his heart. But Ruth knew that it was not a dream now; Michael had forgiven her, and she knew, too, that she loved him. At last she looked up at him with a bright smile.

“All this time I am forgetting that you must be hungry. If you really mean me to be your wife, I

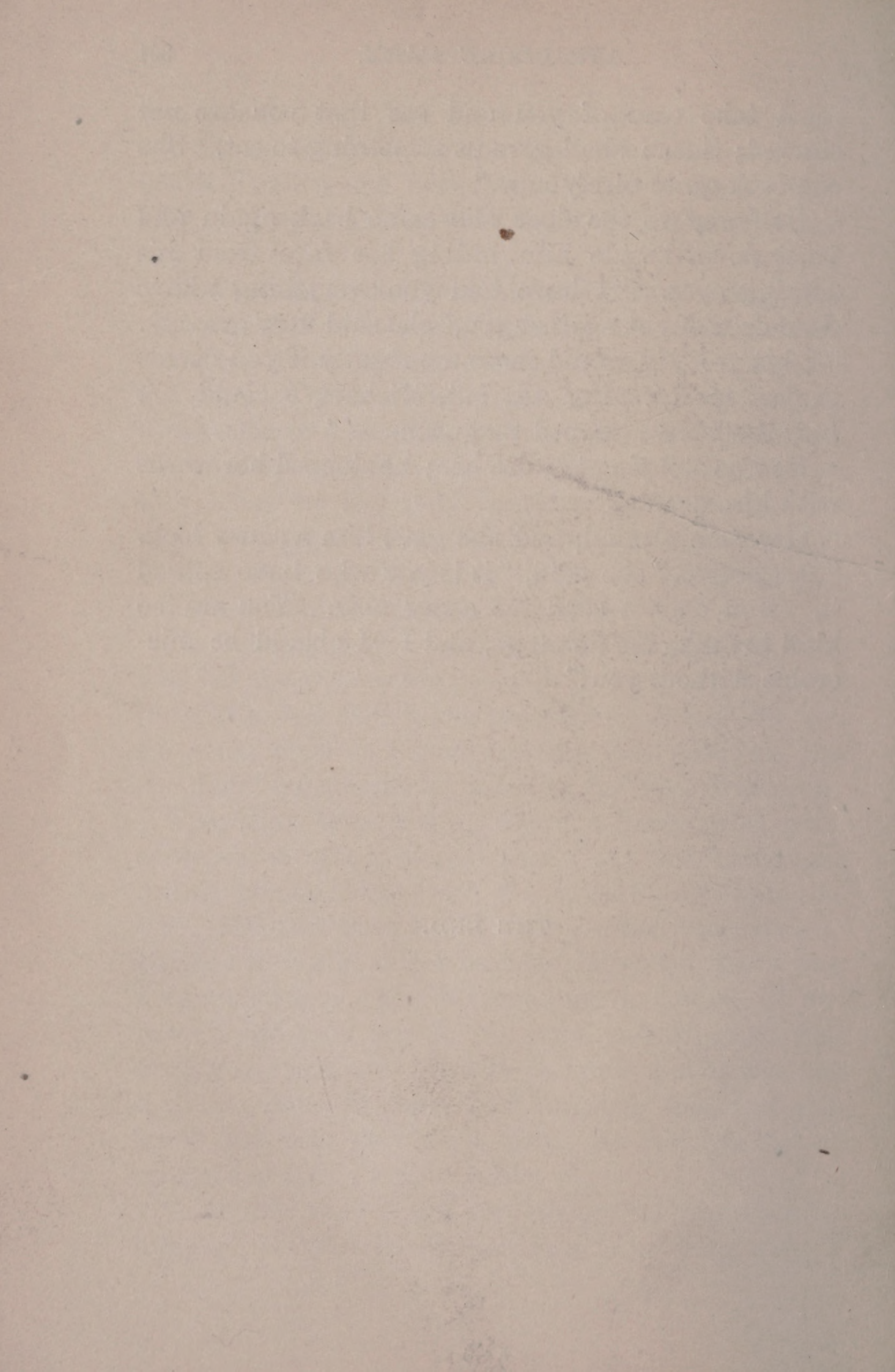
must take care of you and see that you are not starved; Susan shall give us something to eat. She can cook quite nicely now."

Half-way to the door she came back again and knelt down beside him, hiding her face from his adoring eyes. "I have told you everything I have done or thought against you," she said very gravely. "I believe you would serve me rightly if you decide to cast me off after all; but, Michael, I could not bear it—I have learned that even——"

He was stooping to raise her; he stopped her words with kisses.

Her face cleared, and she gave him a saucy look. "Remember," she said, "it is you who have settled it. You cannot send me away now. You are too kind to make me unhappy, and I—I should be miserable without you!"

THE END.



APPLEDORE FARM

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BY

KATHARINE S. MACQUOID

AUTHOR OF

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